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SORCEROUS STABBER

ORPHEN

THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

17. ECHO THROUGH MY GARDEN, GUNSHOTS!



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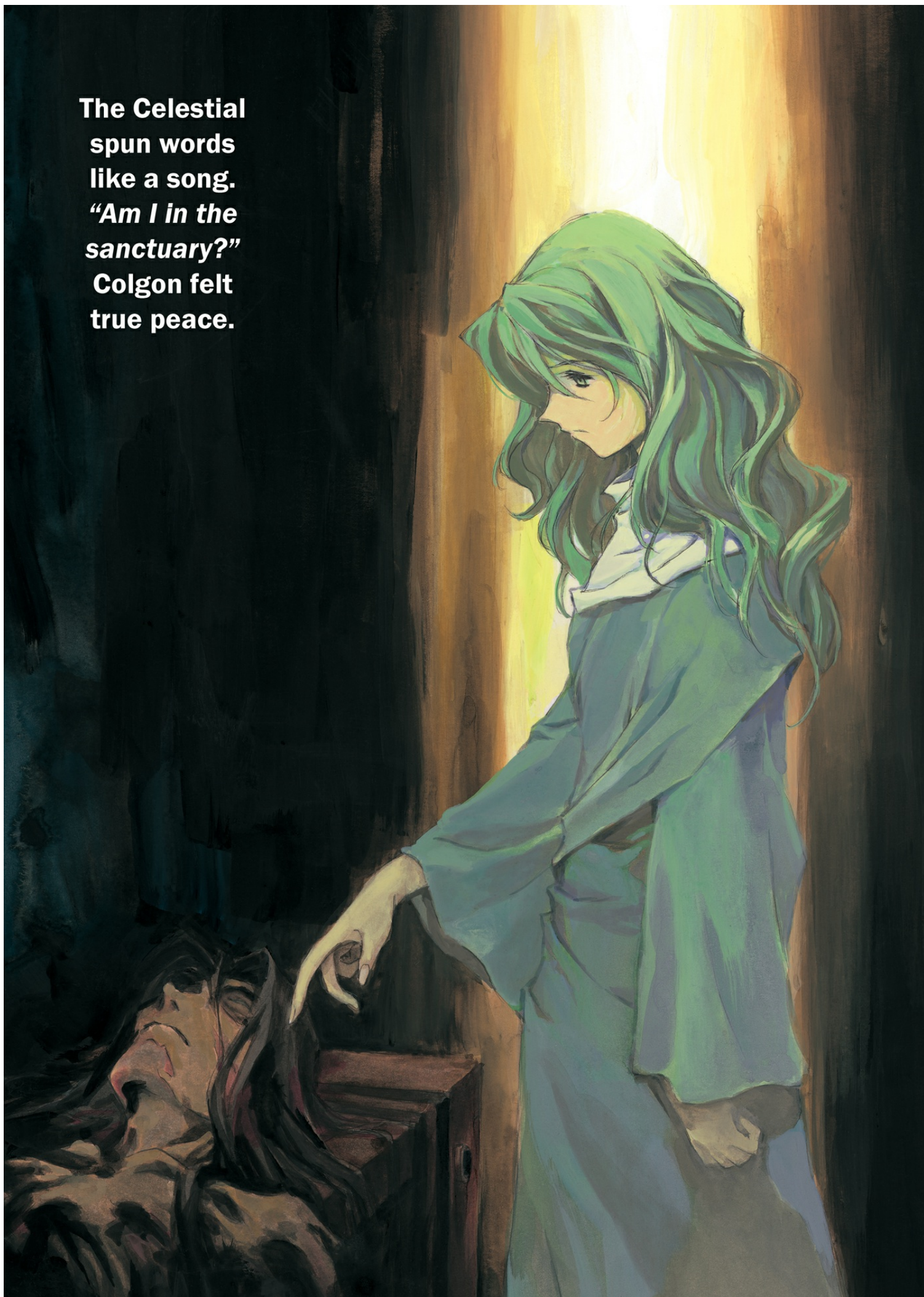


SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY



**Everyone else
was dead. His
task now was to
kill the man in
the mansion.
That was the
only reason he
was here...**

The Celestial
spun words
like a song.
*"Am I in the
sanctuary?"*
Colgon felt
true peace.



**A solemn voice resounded
and power gathered in
one spot. The explosion
tore her to shreds.**



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Prologue

“You can’t move, can you? Of course you can’t. Your body is being rapidly oxidized right now. In other words, you’re rotting.”

It was true. He couldn’t move. He lay atop a bed, unable to even close his eyes. The room was filled with a hazy white phosphorescence. Or maybe there was no such haze and it was just his desiccated eyes playing tricks on him.

There was a terrible smell too. It was hard to endure, but he had no way to plug his nose, so he was powerless to prevent it from entering his nostrils. Though he was suffering, it wasn’t intense enough to qualify as torture. Instead, an awful sense of lethargy was weighing upon him.

He was still conscious. Faint words could still spill from his lips. He hadn’t been completely bound yet. There was still a bit of him enduring through the terrible rotten smell.

“Isn’t it strange that you’re still alive? This poison rots the body while keeping its victim alive... I can’t say it’s a very tasteful method. The sanctuary has things like this, you see.”

The words, like the smell, spilled into his equally unsealable ears.

“Your current weight... Some parts of you have crumbled and fallen away, you see. It’s forty-four kilograms. And it will only lessen. It’s still going to take a while before you die. It’s not as if I had no other options to capture you... but I chose this one.”

He quietly accepted that fact. And the fact that the man aimed to deal the final blow with his words. He intended to break his spirit, steal away his will to resist, and question him. But what did he want? That was the question. What did he even want to ask him?

“Yuis Colgon... That’s your name, right? Though it seems you have several more. A preeminent black sorcerer. A superior fighter. Probably one of the most accomplished casters on the continent... Or you *used* to be, in any case.” He

emphasized that fact before continuing. “That’s all in the past now. You’ll never recover. You’ll die slowly, never to stand on your own two feet again. Though there is a way to save you.”

Silence. An extended silence that lasted far longer than one breath.

“Unfortunately, this is not an interrogation but an execution. As you know, the sanctuary has its own Network. There’s no information you have that we need. There will be no deals made here. So you are doomed to die.”

The man spoke each sentence deliberately. But these were lies. He acknowledged that fact quietly as well. They were nothing more than threats.

What was it he said? He thought to himself, unable to come up with the word he sought. He was clearly losing his ability to think. Maybe his brain was rotting—no, he shouldn’t think about that. In any case, they were just tricks to break his spirit. To make him... His vocabulary was failing him...

To make me despair. He finally recalled the word with a sense of bitter amusement. The man would show his complete superiority to get information out of him. He knew that their Network was not all-powerful. Childman’s and Damian’s Networks too were far from all-powerful. In the end, such sorcery couldn’t be controlled for any one person’s sake. It wouldn’t be of use to anyone.

BuT... mAyBe... A discordant sound interrupted his thoughts.

But maybe, the sanctuary has access to something wholly different... They have access to the ultimate sorcery that humans can’t even dream of there...

Don’t think about this, he told himself.

His body temperature wouldn’t rise. Of course, he was already so hot he felt like he was burning. Flesh gives off heat when it rots...

Don’t think about it, he repeated, correcting his train of thought.

Dragons. Such things existed in the sanctuary. Humanity’s final opponent in the battle for hegemony over the continent. That was what his lord understood, he believed.

I’m in the sanctuary! he suddenly realized.

The voice continued on coldly. “Even if I told you to give up, I doubt you’d stop struggling... Until your dying breath, you will analyze my words, searching for a chance to fight. I know that. I know several men like you. You’re a warrior. I envy you. I am not a warrior, yet I must fight all the same.”

He didn’t have to strain to remember who the voice belonged to. He couldn’t see the man in his hazy vision, but he still clearly recalled what he looked like. The man in the holy robes. The man who’d spied on him in Urbanrama.

A professional killer. That much was obvious. If he was an agent of the sanctuary, he wouldn’t be defeated easily. Doppel X, the mark of a traitor. His enemy, that he’d fought all this time. He had always wanted to ask them something, though he’d given up on ever finding an opportunity to do so. He wanted to know exactly what made them traitors. But he couldn’t ask the question now either, since his mouth wouldn’t move.

The voice continued. That cool voice continued amid the stench. “It seems you were a guardian of the lord of the Imminent Domain. Not that I know anything about that. They’re cold to newcomers at the sanctuary...”

He couldn’t see the man, but he sensed that he might be shrugging his shoulders before he continued.

“I was ordered to kill that man. They’ll take care of my transportation, apparently. I have complaints, but I can’t deny that dragon sorcery is convenient. They could go kill that man and come back with the same effort it would take me to go on a walk.”

This was another scheme, this man’s words. It was nothing more than a bluff. If they really could do such a thing, his lord would have been dead a long time ago. However...

“It’s an opportunity we’ll never get again,” the man said casually. “There are many people moving to kill that man now. I’ll just be taking advantage of that and joining in. I see. I heard you’ve made use of the balance up until now. But balance is a fragile thing... It can all come crashing down with the smallest impact.”

After a pause, he added, “Of course... I also know a man who sought rigid justice and failed.”

It was nothing more than a scheme. A scheme to instill despair in him and to obtain what he desired.

He repeated it like a spell. His name. Yuis Els Ito Egum...

Something about the man's presence changed. His voice changed too. He must have turned around. It was harder to hear now, but the words still made it into his ears.

"You won't be able to contact your allies anymore after this. Help won't come for you. You'll be dead before I get back, so this is our final parting. Farewell."

The man left.

He ignored this and continued his repetitions. Yuis Els Ito Egum Ed Colgon. He listed out the names and did what was needed of him as well as what was not.

It was nothing more than a scheme. A scheme in order to make him despair. An old trick. The "poison" was a lie too. All they had done was restrain him and put a suggestion on him. What were they trying to get out of him? Get something from them instead. Extract the enemy's secrets. Keep fighting, always. The enemy was plotting. That was proof that they had no other useful clues. In fact, *he* was in the superior position.

Scheming... *Am I an incurable fool?!* This was stupid. If he could win simply by not accepting his defeat, he wouldn't be going through so much trouble.

Accept it. This is a tight spot. He couldn't move. He had no method of improving his current situation.

He didn't need to think about his lord. His lord was planning on making use of Krylancelo. If that went well, he would make it just fine. It wouldn't matter what he was up against. He believed he was the only one who could kill the Razor-Sharp Successor. Just as the Razor-Sharp Successor was the only one who could kill him. If there was a problem, it was...

There was a face he remembered. No, not a face. A pair of narrow shoulders. A trembling voice. Supple muscles trained for a life of competitive swordsmanship and a harsh gaze. Her. He'd been able to send her a short warning under Damian's notice. But had she listened to him? To her, he was merely someone to take revenge against. Revenge for her murder.

Keep fighting, always.

Fight until you die. Even now, with your dying body rotting. Even in this desperate situation. Even when you know you'll lose.

Despair... Despair? No.

He was still conscious. He wasn't completely bound. He wasn't completely swathed. He was still alive.

It wasn't over yet. And as long as he didn't make a mistake when he made his move, he would be victorious in the end.

Chapter I: First Premonition of Death

“Six will die. That’s the plan.”

The man likely hadn’t slunk out of the darkness just to make that proclamation—though he couldn’t say he had any reason to believe that, really. Still, he had no choice but to place his trust in the man. That was just the sort of being this man was. The devil of Kiesalhima.

“Yes,” he agreed.

If this man was a devil, what did that make him? An angel? He had to laugh at that.

“From these sacrifices, we will obtain what is most important to us.”

“Which is?”

“Time.”

“A postponement?”

“Exactly. With the time we’ll earn, we will sharpen the blades we will use to pierce our enemies’ throats. The sharper they can be, the better.”

“True, there shouldn’t be any danger following our current plans. Do you really think they’ll be fooled, though?”

“There’s no need to fool them. We only need to sow uncertainty.”

The devil spoke with absolute confidence. His voice was one you had no choice but to trust completely.

“But they won’t be the only ones confused, will they?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter. When fighting an enemy using a Network, allies become enemies as well—sources of information for our enemies.”

“I have a concern.”

“Tell me.”

“I feel the presence of... an unknown element. We should have taken measures against every force we are aware of, but...”

“Use your own discretion to deal with it. I permit you to use your power to its absolute limit if you deem it necessary.”

“Very well.”

The conversation ended there. His connection with the devil was severed.

Alone in the darkness of information, he ruminated on the title. Devil. It was dangerous to call him by his name over the Network when their battle with their enemy was really getting started. Devil. He had been struck with wonder over his surprise when the man had introduced himself in that way—it was his first surprise in decades.

What did he have to be so surprised about, he wondered. There was no meaning in such a temporary title. Names had no meaning.

That was why he hadn’t named himself. As the master of the Network, there was no need for him to name himself in this world of information.

“For a perfect world...”

Even his mutterings were meaningless. They were mere information that would vanish, leaving behind only a slight ripple. All information was like that in the real world. It always wore down. And once it had vanished, it settled here in the Network. Accumulations of the past.



The wind whipped up the debris from the dried land, drawing a mottled pattern with the dust in the air. This wasteland, which no one would even try to develop, was permeated by a quiet sense of starvation alone. What had this place been like in the past? Or had it been like this since ancient times? If that was the case, why hadn’t this place become a giant sand pit? He never had enough wisdom to answer pointless questions like that.

There was nothing here. Not even death. There wasn’t some destiny of annihilation reigning over all—it just watched over everything, omnipresent, from somewhere no one could reach. Forever.

Life wouldn't continue indefinitely. Offspring would die out. New life would be exterminated. The world would end. That was the correct fate for the natural world.

"Well, I can show you there. I've never heard the name 'Imminent Domain' before, but I think I'm headed to the same place. Probably, at least."

"Probably?" Orphen asked, questioning his sister's vague words. All he could see before him was the plains. He couldn't see his sister. She was behind him. Though he didn't know why she hadn't come around to his front to talk to him. After all, he couldn't see her expression, so he didn't know what she was thinking.

He turned around. There his sister was, looking him in the eye. Her gaze was clear, her long black hair flowing in the breeze.

Pursing her lips, she asked, "Why do you think I'm here?"

Orphen smiled wryly and shook his head. "No idea. You didn't answer me when I asked you earlier, did you?"

"I suppose I didn't," was all she said before closing her mouth.

Maybe she never intended to tell him in the first place. For several seconds, Leticia averted her gaze from him.

Then her normally schooled expression hardened. "It's because my role is to eliminate enemies your power won't be enough for."

"Your role?" More vague wording he didn't understand. "What role is that?" he asked her.

"It's nothing anyone prepared for me. It's the same as how you found your own role yourself."

He groaned. "What are you talking about?"

"All of the things you've experienced in the last few years... Well, I won't say all of them, but I have knowledge of a fair amount of them," she quickly told him.

He responded with silence that the wind drowned out. Like the flame of a candle, it vanished for a moment before returning to its original size with a

flicker.

It was just a few seconds without words in the wasteland.

Orphen opened his mouth to respond to his sister's vague, incomprehensible words several times in those few seconds, but each time, he swallowed his response instead. Not even he knew what he wanted to say, what words rose to the tip of his tongue, what words he condemned to the back of his throat.

As a result, he instead waited for her to continue in silence.

Without changing the expression on her face, Leticia said, "Everyone told me. I'm connected to the Network right now. I can use a certain amount of its functions. I guess I'm... in the same position as Colgon."

"Was it Forte? Spying's a pretty nasty hobby." He glanced at Leticia as he muttered the name of the older man, the only person in the Tower—no, probably the only person in the west of the continent—who could use the Network.

She gave him a wry smile in response, though it wasn't that much of a change in her expression. "You're free to interpret my words however you'd like to."

"You said your 'role,' right?"

He didn't care anymore why she'd come here. If Forte had sent her, he must have had a reason to. And by the same token, if she'd followed his instructions, she must have had a reason to do so too. There was no point in prying about that. If she wanted to tell him, then she would.

There was something else he was more curious about. Orphen took a step toward her and raised his voice against the wind.

"What's my role, then?"

"I said it was nothing anyone prepared for you, didn't I? You should have decided that for yourself."

"I decided, eh?" It wasn't so much a question as a musing. He wouldn't get an answer no matter who he asked. If this view of the wastelands in front of him was the natural fate awaiting him, then there were no special roles for people to play as they lived their lives.

There was no meaning in the way people died either. Still, his emotions alone denied that.

The wind blew. At the same strength it had been blowing all this time.

“...Enemies my power won’t be enough for?” Orphen asked quietly, almost looking down on himself as the atmosphere whipped at him.

Leticia put both hands on her hips and answered frankly, “That’s pretty much everyone we’re about to meet.”

“Every single one of them’s going to be an enemy?”

“I’d say so.” She grimaced and glanced to the side. “Even she might be one.”

“You mean Irgitte?” Orphen asked, tracing the line of his sister’s gaze. He expected to see Irgitte when he looked. Irgitte Sweetheart, one of the Thirteen Apostles, the strongest black sorcerers in the capital.

Leticia made the slightest movement of her jaw, shaking her head. “I only mean it’s a possibility.”

“I don’t know what you mean at all. What are you talking about?” Orphen was getting irritated. He fixed his gaze on her and went on. “Are you sure you’re not misunderstanding something? I got an invitation from this lord, so I’m going to see him. I’m worried about Claiomh and Majic, but as long as we don’t know their intentions, it’s dangerous to label them as enemies, isn’t it? Colgon’s working for this lord guy, you know?”

“He has his own role to play. What I don’t know is the role of this so-called lord.”

“Can you shut up about roles already? It feels like somebody’s forcing them on us. I don’t like it,” Orphen told his sister, annoyed that her expression never changed no matter what he said to her.

She didn’t acknowledge him in any way, but she seemed to hear what he said, at least. She rephrased herself. “A lot of people are taking action right now, and this lord is at the center of it all. It’s unnatural that a person in the middle of all this would be so unknown to everyone outside his territory—” Leticia stopped there as if she’d realized something.

Another voice cut in. “The lord of the Imminent Domain’s top secret among the Union of Lords. Not even we know who he really is. Even though people have been whispering his name for at least twenty years now.”

Orphen looked to the voice to find a woman peeking out from behind a rock that was about to crumble. Her cheerful appearance seemed to cast a chilly shadow.

She took a step out from behind the rock and continued. “The higher-ups of the Thirteen Apostles ordered us to come here and get a clear picture of the man, regardless of what the Union of Lords wants. If they found out we were doing this, I’m sure it wouldn’t just be one or two of our heads flying.”

“You were listening?” Leticia asked her.

The woman—Irgitte—gave her a big wry smile in return. “You noticed, didn’t you?”

“No. Sorry, but I wasn’t aware of you at all.”

“Uh huh...”

The two glared at each other for a time before Irgitte sighed and looked down. She must have run out of patience.

“Well, I understand what you’re trying to say.”

“I don’t,” Orphen spat, feeling out of the loop.

That strained smile returned to Irgitte’s face. “All it means is that even if my companions abandoned me, I’m a member of the Thirteen Apostles and you two aren’t.”

“So you have to carry out your mission?”

“Yes. I have to sneak into the Imminent Domain and investigate the lord there.”

Orphen wasn’t sure whether he should ask, but he found himself doing so anyway. He knew the question might cement her position into that of an enemy, but he still had to ask. “Even if that was *your* mission, Seek Marrisk and, err...”

“Kakorkist Isthian. I know. It does seem they’re on a different mission than mine,” Irgitte muttered with a defeated slump. “They’re Sorcerous Stabbers. Exceptionally talented ones too. Krylancelo, they’re currently practicing, unlike you.”

“It’s not like I ever *was* a practicing assassin, you know,” Orphen grumbled. He felt his lips pursing.



She didn't seem to care, however. She simply went on, "There are no official records of them ever taking on such missions—I mean, of course there aren't—but I've heard the rumors. I'm sure you know this, Krylancelo, but there are rumors like that about every sorcerer who's undergone Stabber combat training. I didn't want to believe them, but I guess I can't exactly deny them anymore."

"If their mission was assassination, then why did you come along with them?" Leticia asked her. "Wouldn't you only slow them down?"

Irgitte glared at her before answering, "Miss Maria sent me on this mission with them. I think... she must have known, so she sent me along to try to stop them." Her words faded there.

What had she been about to say, and why had she not said it? Orphen could easily guess. Her role...

She raised her voice as if to forget it all. "We have to stop them."

"Colgon..."

"Huh?" Irgitte was taken aback by the unexpected name.

Leticia seemed to have realized something a while back. She was staring downward, not moving.

Orphen recalled something too. A currently practicing assassin... *He's the only one I can think of...*

Orphen repeated the name. "It's Colgon. He's working for the lord—he told me that himself. If that's the case, then those two are the ones in trouble. They're the ones who'll be killed."

His role. He repeated the word to himself.

That was the role of Colgon—unmistakably the most accomplished assassin on the Kiesalhiman continent.



"I feel like I'm forgetting something important."

That could go for anyone, at any time, about anything. Lottecia muttered the

thought to herself in silence.

The reason she didn't respond was because the sentence clearly wasn't directed at her. Lottecia looked up at the dwarf brother standing dramatically on top of a rock for some reason before directing her gaze vaguely at the sky, where she tried to organize her uncertain emotions.

She couldn't come up with any coherent thoughts. A philosopher had once wondered whether the human spirit resided in the brain or the heart. But both of those were wrong. There was no spirit in the body. Still, that didn't mean something so uncertain and vague as a soul existed either. Basically, she didn't think people *had* spirits. But she didn't voice this either.

Gently holding the sword that was a memento of her late father, she sighed. Humans had no spirit. There was no meaning in her sigh either...

"I feel like we're forgetting something important, Dartin." The dwarf repeated himself, evidently displeased that he hadn't gotten a response.

The other dwarf, sitting at the bottom of the rock, replied languidly, "I think you're forgetting more than one or two things."

"I get that feeling too, but only one thing's important. What the hell are we doing in a place like this anyway?"

It wasn't just them. Lottecia didn't know what she was doing here either.

She had no spirit, but there was no end to her questions. And not just the number of them. The depth of her questions had no end. She sunk into them up to her knees... her waist... her chest... She kept sinking and never reached the bottom. But she couldn't escape them either. Her questions never ended.

Why am I here? The answer to that was obvious. To kill Ed, her former husband. With her own hands. With this sword.

With this sword...? The memento of her father. A magic sword she didn't know how to use. But she would use it to kill Ed.

Ed. Colgon. Yuis.

A vast number of people all called him by different names. Names she didn't know, that referred to him. It just went to show how little she really knew

about him—for each name she didn't know, there was a part of him she didn't know to go with it.

What's the point in even thinking about that? she asked herself.

Ed. He was Ed.

She heard one of the dwarves—the younger one, Dortin—grumbling something. “What are you talking about? Didn't you make a deal with that long-haired sorcerer?”

“Mm. That's right. She said she would thank us if she was able to meet that debt collector.”

“She sure did.”

“But we haven't been thanked.”

“We sure haven't.”

“...What do we do?”

“Why are you getting all timid *now*?”

Half-listening to their conversation, Lottecia was recalling other words. Words spoken by an illusion that had sprung up from the wind.

“Protect yourself!”

He was... worried about me? Why?

She had no idea what his words meant. Maybe they didn't mean *anything*.

If that was the case, then there was no point in even thinking about them... Maybe the wind had just sounded like those particular words. There was no such thing as a spirit. There was only her body, which desired revenge, and the body that marked the endpoint of that goal. That was the only relation between them. There was no meaning in the words exchanged between them. There was no need to listen to them, and no need to think about them.

Is there? Really?

“I'm doing nothing of the sort,” the dwarf atop the rock asserted.

“She might have completely forgotten about thanking us, you know,” replied

the younger brother.

“Well, what about asking her in a roundabout sort of way?”

“For example...?” the brother asked, though his voice contained about eighty percent resignation.

“Gimme.”

“I don’t know about that.” The younger brother’s tone had risen to one hundred percent resignation.

The conversation had nothing to do with her, but one part of it resonated within her as she listened distractedly.

“Gimme.” That was enough. “Gimme...” Just as something had been taken from her.

That was what was between the two of them. It wasn’t just one thing. It was many things, many objects. This magic sword being one of them.

“Oh yeah? Think I need to rehearse more? Listen, we’re only gonna get one chance. That’s the feeling I get. We should take this opportunity and kill him with a big profit.”

“I hope it goes well. Really, I do. I mean it,” the dwarf repeated, the resignation in his voice turning into tearfulness.

“Umm.” Lottecia called out to them on a whim as she stood.

The dwarves didn’t respond right away. They might have forgotten that she was there. It was likely, in fact. The younger one blinked his eyes in surprise, turned to her, and asked, “Yes?” while adjusting the position of his glasses.

Losing her nerves for whatever reason, Lottecia mumbled, “Where is everyone?”

“I think they’re over there.”

She looked in the direction he was pointing. No matter which way she turned, the plains were unchanging. The position of the sun alone changed little by little as it drew its arc across the sky. But even with the shadows changing, not much else about the windy scenery changed. Still, if there was only one direction

being pointed out to her, even scenery like this had some meaning.

No... There shouldn't be... any meaning in it...

She squeezed out the air in her tightened chest and put her thoughts into words. "I'll head over there, then."

"Okay," was all the dwarf said.

With that word at her back, she walked off. She left no footprints, and no one watched her. Her father had died. Ed had left. She alone survived, all the while feeling like she shouldn't have.

She was still living in this meaningless world.

This sense of emptiness... It's so stupid. She cursed to herself and sped up. *Revenge isn't empty. I'll follow through with it.*

Ed would be a formidable enemy. It was such familiar knowledge that it was making her doubt herself. That was all it was.

With the dry wind pushing her on, sounding like a squeaky wheel, she walked on.



Tch... The sound that leaked out from between her lips wasn't her clicking her tongue but the sound of her molars grinding against each other. The sound of scraping molars, ground down from clenching her teeth again and again for over ten years.

The contact had lasted a mere moment. And *she* had been the one launching an ambush. Yet it was half of *her* that crumbled. Not her body. Half of the body armor that was no better than an amulet worn for good luck had been blown off, shredded. She wasn't quite sure what had hit her. But something had made contact. For just a moment.

And like an explosive, it had torn her armor from her.

Not bad! Winona groaned as she supported herself before she fell, her shoes sliding across the ground of the wastes. She didn't care about her equipment. It was meaningless either way. She adjusted her grip on the gun in her left hand, moving her finger from outside the trigger guard to the trigger proper. *Now,*

where are you...?

She looked to her left and right, absorbing the recoil from the movement with her knees. Her enemy was nowhere to be seen. She didn't even sense a presence nearby. Didn't hear anyone breathing. A sense of discomfort at the discord between the atmosphere and her own pulse poked and prodded at her nerves.

Though her nerve fibers were inside her body, they gave her all the information she could possibly want about everything around her, but right now, the one thing they couldn't tell her was what she needed to know most: her enemy's location. She followed her enemy's movements with her eyes. She couldn't believe she had to do something so amateurish!

Which means... the difference between me and my enemy is the difference between an expert and an amateur, eh?

She stopped moving. Remaining still, she checked around her once again.

There weren't all that many places to hide. Still, her enemy was somehow completely hidden. The only way she could think to do such a thing was to sink into the ground or to take off and fly... She looked around again, and all she saw was some crumbling rocks, cracks in the ground only about as wide as her arm, and rotted trees. That and wind tinted by drifting sand.

Though it wasn't as if she had no ideas whatsoever.

There was one place someone could definitely hide, and the terrain had nothing to do with it. Even on top of a frozen lake, this hiding spot was flawless. The same as melting and vanishing into the ground.

Winona threw herself forward. She caught herself as she fell and rolled, popping up facing the other direction. And just as she suspected, her adversary had been hiding behind her.

A dark, humanoid shadow registered in her sight, but just as it did...

A sharp pain ran through her eyes. An impact struck her left hand. There was a firing sound—since she'd moved with her finger on the trigger, the gun had likely misfired. And since her eyes were closed, she had no idea where the bullet had gone. It probably hadn't hit her enemy. Things were never so

convenient. There were several meters between her and her enemy. Deedee's aim wasn't very precise, so she could never be sure she would hit something at any distance greater than zero.

The bigger problem was her eyes. She desperately resisted the temptation to rub her eyelids. Her enemy being a certain distance away only meant that she was also a certain distance from her enemy. There was no way her adversary could have launched a precise attack at her eyeballs after her roll. That was, no *non-sorcerer* could have done that. But she hadn't heard an incantation.

She felt cold air on her face. Felt something stealing the moisture from her skin and vaporizing.



Is this... some kind of chemical? That would certainly work if thrown from a distance.

Several possible chemicals came to mind immediately, but it was a pointless thought. It could have been something that would kill her instantly, and it could have just been muddy water. Either way, she wouldn't be able to open her eyes for several seconds. That fact alone presented a fatal issue. Her eyes had been taken out by an enemy whose presence she couldn't sense, and she had no doubt that a second attack would be coming in the next few seconds. That reality alone presented a fatal issue.

I'm dead.

This time, it wouldn't be her armor exploding, but her ribs. Next, her organs. After that, her spine. At which point would she die, she wondered.

But, you know... She was aware that the enemy could blow her away at point-blank range.

But she had her own options at point-blank range: she could pump her enemy full of bullets. If just one of those bullets reached her adversary's nervous system, she would have fulfilled her duty.

Whether or not she survived afterward wasn't something she needed to think about this late in the game.

She waited for her chance.

Five bullets remained inside Deedee. Just one could easily take a human life, but a thousand of them could go off in random directions, not hitting anything. It was an unreliable murder weapon.

Her maintenance of it was perfect. There shouldn't be any mechanical misfires. She would be able to fire all her bullets. She told herself that.

She waited for an instant. Several instants went by, feeling like forever.

After several seconds of this, she opened her eyes.

Her vision was blurry with tears, but she could see. Her retinas captured the hazy sight of the wasteland all around her. Dead land one step away from hell. The Imminent Domain...

She couldn't see her adversary. She stood there all by herself.

She lowered her gun and wiped her face. It wasn't chemicals that had taken out her eyes. She smiled wryly looking at the dirt on her hand. She'd just had sand thrown at her. And while she'd had her eyes closed, her enemy had run.

"So you won't make an all-or-nothing bet, eh? What a boring match..." she muttered to herself.

She felt no humiliation. She acknowledged that she'd survived. That was all that had happened. When she considered what the enemy she was fighting was, that was all there was to it.

Even if you run, it's not like I don't know where you're going. It's a long way to my lord still, and I'm not going to stop my pursuit of you.

She was about to step forward when she noticed a presence out of the corner of her eye. It wasn't her enemy. She simply stopped, not bothering to get into a defensive stance.

Standing there was an unfriendly-looking man who was a little shorter than her—of course, logically, she knew that it wasn't truly a man, a woman, or even a human, and was nothing more than what it appeared to be. Still, there *appeared* to be a man before her, and she couldn't honestly say there was anything unnatural about the sight.

He was a high master of sorcery on the continent. A supreme, unparalleled sorcerer. Damian Rue. Winona looked at him and opened her mouth.

"Have you finally gotten tired of it all and decided to pass on quietly? You've never let an enemy this deep in before."

The words tasted like blood. She must have cut her mouth at some point. She spat out a rust-red mass with her saliva.

There was no change in Damian's appearance. In a strange position as if he were sitting in midair or standing on the tips of his toes, he said, "Yuis isn't responding to my summons."

"You told me that earlier. That's why we changed plans, right? What happened to the kids?"

“They’re speaking with our lord right now. There’s no particular problem there.”

“Then I wish there would be no problems here either.” Winona scoffed. She spread her arms and continued. “That ghost shit is stale. It barely even worked.”

“I’m impressed the Thirteen Apostles are prepared to throw away sorcerers of that caliber.”

“So you act like you’re the strongest sorcerer every day and at a time like this you can’t even deal with some grunts?” She was losing her temper. Of course, she knew it wouldn’t have any effect on Damian.

The supreme white sorcerer merely quietly said exactly what she expected him to. “It’s Yuis’s job to eliminate intruders.”

“And it’s our job to protect our lord. How’s that different?”

“Even if Pluto the Demon himself infiltrated the Imminent Domain, I would be able to destroy him,” the white sorcerer stated calmly, in what was by no means empty vanity. Of course, she knew that vanity was meaningless for the man—no, for this existence.

“But doing so would require nearly all of my energy. I absolutely cannot fight at my full strength. That is the limit of a white sorcerer, the constraint. If I use up all my power, the Imminent Domain will be defenseless. The sanctuary is aware of our existence now because of what happened in Urbanrama. We cannot take risks.”

“Then feel free to pass away peacefully on your own. *I’ll* protect our lord.”

In the end, black sorcerers whose true intentions were inscrutable and suspicious beings like white sorcerers couldn’t truly protect her lord. It was just her. She was the only one in the Imminent Domain who served her lord in the true sense of the word.

There were people she could consider comrades in the Imminent Domain, and not just one or two of them. But that didn’t change anything. In the end, it was just her.

“No matter who comes, I’ll kill them. That’s fine, isn’t it? Tell me where the one who just disappeared is. I’ll chase after.”

“I lost the trail.”

“...What?”

Her irritation finally reached its peak. She groaned, furrowing her brow deeply.

“Don’t bullshit me.”

“I’m not bullshitting you. The enemy appears able to fool the surveillance of the Network.”

“It’ll be nice if you ever manage to come in handy for something. Get some help, then. Trinky and Ride should be nearby. If they’re not enough, then I guess it’s finally time to beg that black sorcerer, huh?”

With that, she walked off. If she couldn’t sense the enemy’s presence, then she’d just have to use her eyes. And if she couldn’t count on Damian, then she’d just have to do the searching herself.



Sorcerers can manifest their ideals. That was unproven history—unsubstantiated, but something she could easily believe. *Ideals that don’t lose to the phenomena of reality. That is what we manifest. From the straightforward results of sorcery, sorcerers gain the evidence they need to believe in their ideals. The one who said that was...*

Who was it who had said that? She couldn’t remember. It wasn’t her. It wasn’t her teacher. It was no one she knew. Searching her unreliable memories, Irgitte silently gave up.

It was probably some sorcerer from a long time ago—if someone said it during a speech when the Continental Sorcerers’ Association was being formed, that would make the most sense. Sorcerers can manifest their ideals. They could separate themselves from their foolish pasts. They could build a world their descendants wouldn’t be ashamed of. It did sound like a speech. Maybe not a well-written one, but the audience probably liked it.

Did no one think that conquering your ideals made them uncertain?

“Remember this?”

She looked up and smiled.

“I don’t remember when it was, but you brought your swimsuit when we went training in the mountains—”

A chilly voice interrupted her. “Your hands aren’t moving.”

Irgitte looked down at her hands without protesting. She was stopped in the middle of loading a heavy repeating bowgun.

She fished out a cartridge that had four shots in it from Leticia’s bag and shook her head. How stupid.

Leticia had her back to her, silently affixing black leather combat gear to her body over her undergarments—it was standard equipment at the Tower, but was considered old fashioned by the School in the capital. She could hardly believe the woman had brought something like this with her. Sure, it was highly defensive with blade-proof fabric and leather woven together, and it allowed one to carry a variety of hidden weapons. But it wasn’t suited for traveling long distances and was even less suited as everyday wear. Still, it was a sort of symbol that those from the Tower, herself included, believed in.

Obviously, Leticia hadn’t brought another set for Irgitte. Tugging her long black hair free from the back of her clothes, Leticia quickly fastened everything up.

Watching her, Irgitte murmured, “I didn’t know you used weapons.”

“Well, they’re not things you usually have to use, are they?” Leticia said casually, looking back at her over her shoulder. “You should carry something you can use too. I brought plenty of extras... and I’ll be leaving anything I can’t bring with me here anyway.”

“I’m... fine,” she said, her voice so weak she even surprised herself. She loaded the cartridge into the bowgun and inserted the pin that acted as its safety, handing the weapon to Leticia.

She couldn’t hide the bitter smile on her face. “Where’d you even get

something like this? You don't know an arms dealer, do you?"

"Want a list of all of Forte's acquaintances? You'll be able to live off of the money from blackmail alone," Leticia said in a tone that sounded dead serious.

Irgitte looked down at her empty hands and glanced down at Leticia's bag while she was at it. True, it probably wasn't a joke.

Decked out in her combat gear, Leticia MacCready reminded her of Maria Huwon. Those were the two black sorcerers most specialized for combat that Irgitte knew. They were certainly similar types, though they didn't look at all alike. Due to Miss Maria's young age, Irgitte, Leticia, and Maria had a bit of a strange relationship. Maria Huwon and Leticia MacCready were senior and junior in the fundamentals class, and Irgitte and Maria were student and teacher. But Irgitte and Leticia were almost the same age. And now that she thought about it, there'd been only some five years or so between Leticia and her own teacher, Childman Powderfield.

Leticia crouched down and Irgitte watched as she pulled out a small wooden box wrapped in black paper—it almost looked like a grenade, but it couldn't be... She took weapon after weapon out of her bag like it was some kind of gag. A large knife in a sheath; a thick, ugly parrying dagger; a collapsible baton; a belt with a row of throwing knives in it that looked like a sausage you'd see hanging outside a butcher's shop.

Lastly, Leticia began to wrap a thin chain around her left arm before she blinked and said, "Oh, this is Krylancelo's."

"Huh?"

The only thing remaining in the bag was a cardboard shoebox. As she picked it up, Irgitte found her hand reaching out to it—she asked permission with her eyes and Leticia didn't say anything to stop her. Irgitte removed the lid from the box, and...

Irgitte yelped, choked with sharp pain. It was her own muscles that had constricted her lungs. Her vision faded for a moment. If she accepted the sight before her as reality, there was only one conclusion she could draw from it. Leticia MacCready. The most elite black sorcerer of the Tower. This woman was insane!

“This is... You...!” she shouted, unable to think of the words to use.

Leticia just stared back at her calmly. As if to say *she* was the one who was insane.

“This is top secret at the Tower. But I’m sure it was Master who proposed that.”

“I’m a member of the Thirteen Apostles right now, you know! Do you understand that?!”

“The Hailstorm... I hope Krylancelo hasn’t forgotten how to use it. He and Colgon are the only ones who were trained to handle it,” Leticia said dispassionately, ignoring Irgitte’s words. There was a faint heat in those cold eyes of hers that so many male students dreamed of lighting up (none had, of course).

“It’s a delicate weapon, so it’s not very reliable, and its power falls short of sorcery, but... he’ll probably still need it.”

There was a weapon that represented knights in the royal family’s Public Safety Plan.



It was an ideal of peace. The hope was that no one would ever oppose that weapon.

A gun. And this wasn't the old-fashioned type of weapon knights were actually equipped with in the capital.

I've heard the rumors, but...

She couldn't help trembling seeing the real thing right in front of her. As long as you weren't completely removed from rumors of any kind, it was practically common knowledge that the Tower was developing the next generation of guns with completely new applications in top secret. The weapon in the box resembled old-fashioned guns, but it was also completely different. Maybe the only thing they shared was an iron will for murder—a simple function to deliver death without mercy at the pull of a trigger. This was a device with that one function and nothing more.

Leticia quietly closed the lid.

Then she quietly, truly quietly, told Irgitte, "You should really arm yourself too."

"I told you I'm—"

The next instant, she was sent flying by a powerful force. No, she was shoved into the rock behind her by a hand clutching her lapel—she hadn't seen Leticia standing up, and she hadn't even registered her hand moving. Unable to speak, Irgitte felt the sorcerer in combat gear crushing her throat powerfully, harshly, deliberately, with strength like a devil.

Voice low, Leticia told her, "Let me just make this clear for you. You're a hindrance to us." She had completely prevented Irgitte's escape and had brought her face almost close enough for their noses to touch. From a distance where Irgitte could feel her breathing, she continued, "I didn't expect you to be here. You'll only hold us back. Krylancelo and I could both die because we're busy worrying about you."

Leticia had loosened her grip, which Irgitte took as a sign that she should say something. "This is so stupid," she squeezed out, her voice hoarse. "What is all this equipment? Who do you think you're going to be fighting—"

“This isn’t even enough,” Leticia replied swiftly.

Irgitte grasped the hand around her throat. She glared at the other woman’s eyes, pushing back against her. Her shaky breaths became words. “You sound like Seek. The lord of the Imminent Domain... You know something, don’t you?!”

The other woman was only using one arm, but she had to use both of hers to push her back. That fact made her grind her teeth.

“Leticia MacCready... Answer me! What are you doing here?!”

“It’s none of your business.”

Leticia suddenly stopped resisting and Irgitte pitched forward. Without paying any mind to the fallen woman, she simply said, “I’m here on personal business.”

“Do you think that’ll work on me?” Irgitte spat, somehow resisting the urge to have a coughing fit.

Leticia just gave a little shake of her head. It wasn’t even enough to cause her hair to sway. “No, I don’t. But I doubt you would believe me even if I told you.”

“It’s too late for that!”

“It really is. Nothing has even really happened yet, but...” she whispered and went silent. Leticia smiled sadly and repeated the same thing. “It’s none of your business...”

That was the end. She couldn’t hear anymore. It would be pointless to do so.

Irgitte sighed with the frustration of admitting defeat—or maybe some other empty feeling. She adjusted her shirt and stood tall, fixing Leticia with a look.

“Either way, I have my own mission. I won’t tell the two of you to protect me.”

“No... I’m sure you won’t,” Leticia agreed, picking up the shoebox with the gun in it. She apparently intended to discard the clothes she’d worn here and her bag now. She would take along only her combat gear and the knives and chain she’d equipped herself with.

With a groan, a shadow fell over Leticia MacCready’s face. Irgitte heard a

small whisper come from her. “Can I ask you something?”

“What is it?” Irgitte asked, overcome with unease at the sudden change in Leticia’s demeanor. There was none of the strength she’d used to intimidate her in Leticia’s expression anymore. She was just... looking at the ground.

In a voice Irgitte almost couldn’t pick up, she asked, “Seek Marrisk and, umm...”

“Kakorkist Isthian.”

“Can I beat the two of them?”

“Huh?” It was such an unexpected question. Irgitte blinked two or three times, but the other woman’s manner remained the same.

Leticia continued. “Can I beat two professional Stabbers who work as a team?” From what Irgitte could tell, it was a serious question.

Irgitte hurriedly threw up her hands and said rapidly, “You won’t have to fight those two! Right? Why would you guys have to kill each other—”

Even as she spoke the words, her stomach twisted at how hollow they rang.

That was as far as she could go. She couldn’t say anything else. It wasn’t because Leticia had kept her head down, and it wasn’t because she had tried to say something plausible and her voice had betrayed her. It was because she’d realized.

There was no way she could win.

However... However...

Leticia MacCready intended to fight.

Sorcerers could manifest their ideals. Those words signaled that their history of violence and dark dealings had ended.

The empty words disappeared on the wind.

After that, they didn’t particularly converse anymore. There were a few seconds of awkward silence, and the two of them exchanged wordless nods.

These weren’t nods of acceptance, but merely a way to put aside the current

topic, and they both knew this. The gesture was meaningless, because no matter what they did, time was marching forward and that inevitable moment was approaching.

Irgitte sank into the sluggish flow of time, feeling it tug her gaze with it and dull her sense of pain. She watched the back of her close friend in heavy equipment that didn't suit her in the slightest, and went along with that flow. Even her sense of logic appealing to her that this was insane was empty. In these wastes, this land removed from culture and logic, it wasn't strange for anyone to toy with tools of slaughter.

Leticia walked for a short time, then stopped. Irgitte stopped behind her. She looked up.

Standing before them was Krylancelo, outfitted in combat attire of his own.

A Stabber with sharp eyes, decked out in the same equipment as Leticia's—other than the size, of course. It wasn't as though Irgitte had never seen him looking like this before. But back then, he had only been a boy. The Razor-Sharp Successor, who had absconded from the Tower and gone missing after an experiment that had killed his sister. A student who had succeeded the arts of assassination and combat from his master, Childman Powderfield. He wasn't as heavily armed as Leticia. Of course, the Tower's combat uniforms had several secret compartments, so she couldn't be sure of that. But his only visible piece of equipment was a shortsword in a steel scabbard.

He was just as silent as they were. He didn't even try to make eye contact with them. Maybe he was embarrassed. If the situation wasn't what it was, Irgitte might have thought that.

Leticia handed him the shoebox she was holding. Krylancelo opened it dubiously and looked up with an obvious grimace.

"What's this...?"

"If you can get away with not using it, that'd be for the best." That was all Leticia told him.

Krylancelo groaned with a forced smile. "No wonder this was in here," he said, holding up a leather holster. He carefully removed the gun from the box

and checked the magazine before shoving it into the holster.

Watching him fix the holster to his hip, Leticia said, “It’s been left alone in a storeroom at the Tower for years without any sort of maintenance. And there’s no time to do any now, so if you’re going to use it, be aware of that.”

“Who knows where the bullets are gonna come out of it...”

“I couldn’t bring any spare bullets either. But if you’re going to fight... then you’ll probably need it.”

Irgitte couldn’t hear what Leticia thought he’d be fighting. Krylancelo probably had. He didn’t ask for clarification or anything.

Irgitte turned her head, irritated that there was no place for her in this conversation between siblings. She sensed a presence. Heard light footsteps. She was met with the sight of the girl—what was her name, Lottecia? She was standing there holding a sword with some strange ornamentation, pointing her eyes in a vague direction that was difficult to discern.

They were all present.

Irgitte sighed without meaning to. She shuddered from the chill of the air leaving her lungs. The time was coming. She felt that clearly. Not that she knew exactly what was going to happen. Or *when* it would happen. But she could tell that some sort of doom was approaching. It was one minute closer than it had been one minute ago. Ten seconds closer than it had been ten seconds ago. Something in the future awaited them.

This is stupid. It’s illogical. It ignores all sense. All sorts of words of protest echoed through her mind. But their echoes passed by pointlessly in her chilled heart.

The one who finally spoke up was Krylancelo—and for some reason, she felt like that was strange. Why would he be in command? He and his sister both should have been entirely removed from situations like this. So should she.

Still, it was his voice.

“Let’s go.”

No one else said anything, instead just looking in one direction.

They hadn't even walked one step, yet the Imminent Domain was getting closer. She felt that distinctly.

Chapter II: Second Progression of Death

“I don’t think this could possibly be true, but they haven’t forgotten about us, have they?”

“Hmm...”

His brother had been standing boldly atop the rock for nearly an hour now, a pile of sand forming on him from all the wind. Dortin’s answer was open to interpretation, but on the inside, he was absolutely certain they *had* in fact forgotten about them. He wasn’t even sure any memories of them existed in their minds to be forgotten in the first place. Though he was equally certain that if they too could forget, it would be all the better.

Nothing he could think of disputed that idea. Why were they even here in the first place? *I’m not sure anyone can answer that question, really...* Fate. Coincidence. Entwined destinies. They all seemed wrong to him. It was nothing so impressive and nothing so trivial either. There had doubtless been several chances up until now for the two of them to get out of this. They could have cleanly cut their ties with the debt collector. At the very least, there should have been a more tranquil option they could have picked before getting left behind in this stupidly huge, ruined wasteland.

He couldn’t help feeling that at every opportunity to make one of those choices, they (mostly his brother) had always, every time, picked the worst option possible. Maybe he could only say that with the benefit of hindsight, though.

“That’s only in the one-in-a-million chance that it’s even possible to somehow forget the Bulldog of Masmaturia, the Great Vulcano Volkan,” his brother was muttering. “What should we do...?”

“What indeed...” Dortin groaned in despair. “How do we even get home from here in the first place...?”

The wind blew from flatland to flatland across the wastes.



Guns had existed for some time now. Their origin traced back to the days of the Noble Revolution. Humans had escaped from Celestial rule, and these weapons, which they'd developed themselves, drew attention for their killing power. Sorcerers were just as interested, naturally. The conclusion humanity eventually reached (with some disappointment) was that they were of limited usefulness.

Mechanically speaking, they were quite simple. The ammo consisted of both metal bullets that dealt damage to their targets when they hit and gunpowder that provided the power to eject said bullets, loaded into the same cartridge. These were fed into the gun and impacted by the hammer, which was connected to the trigger, to detonate the gunpowder and eject the bullet. The penetrating power and impacting force of such bullets far surpassed those of any other weapon people could carry on them. They could pierce almost all of the armor found throughout the continent and did fatal damage to the human body. The Union of Lords quickly adopted these revolutionary weapons for the standing army outlined in the Royal Public Safety Plan. And since they were so dangerous, they forbade anyone outside of the knight order to carry one.

What disappointed sorcerers was the weapons' biggest asset—their destructive power still fell far short of sorcery. Additionally, any weapon that made use of gunpowder had the critical flaw of potentially misfiring. With their size naturally limited to something a person could carry around, their chance to misfire or accidentally discharge was extremely high even after improvements in their design. Early sorcery had the same flaw—it was difficult to control—but when sorcery composition theory was applied after the establishment of the Sorcerers' Association, it came to light that perfect control for human sorcerers was not as impossible as had previously been thought. This increase in control was accompanied by an increase in the power of spells as well, and sorcerers almost completely lost interest in these new weapons.

...It seemed that way, at least.

They used those disappointments to fool the Union of Lords into thinking they'd lost interest and sorcerers continued researching guns underground in order to make them practical for their own use. And it wasn't just out of

curiosity. Part of it was a political aim not to let the Union of Lords monopolize the weapons for themselves and a suspicion that guns were clearly being developed as an anti-sorcerer weapon, and part of it was the reasonable assumption that the peace brought about by the Royal Public Safety Plan would not be infallible.

The Union of Lords couldn't be ignorant of their research. There must have been a reason for their tacit tolerance. In the end, even with their army of knights, if they made enemies of the whole Continental Sorcerers' Association, they wouldn't emerge from the conflict unscathed. Especially since the Union of Lords had been enjoying the benefits of their dealings with the Sorcerers' Association ever since the sorcerer-hunting days. Developing weapons cost plenty of money and labor, so if the Sorcerers' Association would do it for them, it couldn't hurt the lords all that much. They could trade notes on the technology all they wanted behind the scenes. The Sorcerers' Association was easy to negotiate with for the Union of Lords. Both organizations owed one another debts. They shared enemies as well: members of the Dragon Faith who hid in all sorts of places, and the Kimluck Church, who up until a few decades ago had been secretly maintaining armed forces the Capital couldn't ignore and intimidating the Union of Lords.

Thus, guns had undergone ample improvements. In order to increase their stability, their parts and workings were simplified, making maintenance easier as well. In order to increase their power, bullets were made out of more dense metals. In order to increase the number of cartridges that could be loaded into them, revolving cylinders were developed. These technologies were shared with the Union of Lords as open secrets.

However...

There were technologies which *weren't* shared, ones which were kept as true secrets. The developers of these technologies were worried that if they spread, the weapons would have killing power that not even highly refined sorcery could oppose. The details of these technologies were strictly protected, but rumors of them had reached even the students. One particular widespread rumor was that if these technologies could be made practical, traditional Stabbers would become completely superfluous. And the one who proposed

these technologies was a young teacher named Childman Powderfield...

“Krylancelo?”

When he heard his name, Orphen snapped out of his reverie and turned around—he craned his head back over his shoulder, then realized the voice hadn’t come from that far back and hurriedly turned it back forward.

It was Leticia, who was walking beside him, who had called his name. And from her tone, it was clear that this wasn’t the first time she’d called him.

Orphen cleared his throat and mumbled, “Y-Yeah? What is it?”

“You’re moving too fast.” That was all she said.

Orphen stopped, not understanding what she meant, until he finally realized: Irgitte was slightly behind them, and Lottecia was several meters behind her.

Waiting for them, Orphen whispered with his sister. The weight of the holster on his hip was bothering him because of what he’d been thinking about while he was walking.

“I was matching *your* pace, Tish.”

“I was following you,” she said, looking exasperated. She laid the heavy repeating bowgun on her shoulder and went on with some annoyance, “To be honest, I’d like to go a bit faster, but...”

“Please don’t wait on my account. I can follow,” Lottecia told them firmly, having just caught up. Her voice made it obvious that her nerves were awfully strained, though—she was breathing hard, and there was sand sticking to the sweat on her brow.

Irgitte, beside her, piped up looking a fair bit better. “I won’t stop you if you all want to race to the horizon.” She wiped the sweat from under her chin. “Does it not occur to you that you could drop dead before you make it to your destination?”

“I’ve taken it into consideration. But if we want to catch up to the assassins in front of us, we’ve got to move faster,” Leticia told her sternly.

Before the two of them could start glaring at each other, Lottecia frowned. “Umm, I’m not really sure what’s going on...”

No one spoke up to explain, so she looked to each of them in turn.

Finally, Orphen raised his hands. “Okay. I get it. There’s no point in pushing ourselves. We’ll explain everything while we take a little break. Is that okay, Tish?”

“...Sure.”

She was no doubt reaching her limit as well—it wasn’t as though Leticia had an overabundance of stamina. Grimacing, she nevertheless sat down and took a deep breath. Her hair had gotten tangled with sand, so she began to brush her fingers through it, sighing again.

Sitting down next to her, Orphen waited for the other two to join them. Irgitte leaned on a nearby rock and next to her, Lottecia folded her legs and sat. Their difference in position was likely the difference between wanting to hear what he had to say and not. He tried not to pay that any mind as he turned to Lottecia to begin.

“A lot of stuff happened while you weren’t around. Frankly, it’s hard for me to say if I even have a clear picture of everything happening right now. Things are pretty dire if I had to say, though.”

“...What is that that you’re wearing, Orphen?”

“Oh. Err... Not sure where to start explaining this either...”

“Are you trying to break records for uncomfortable clothes?”

“No, it’s nothing like that...” Orphen hesitated to continue.

Lottecia glanced around, equally hesitant, then slowly asked, “Umm... Could you start with what’s related to Ed?”

“Colgon’s a black sorcerer who I consider a senior of mine. I think I told you this before, but we studied at the Tower of Fangs under the same master. He’d be Tish here’s junior.”

“...Ed?” Leticia asked.

Orphen held his head and shook it lightly. “I won’t tell you to believe me... It still doesn’t feel real to me. Lottecia here was married to Colgon.”

“What?” his sister asked rather shrilly. It must have been unexpected news.

Realizing something from her reaction, Orphen told her, “I thought you said earlier that you knew everything I knew, Tish.”

“I didn’t say *everything*. It’s not like it can tell me things I don’t think to ask... the Network.” She said the last part quietly, glancing at Irgitte. Then she looked back at Lottecia. Staring hard at her as if to make certain of something, she quietly asked, “Married?”

“Yes.” Lottecia nodded.

As if it was her turn, this time Irgitte butted in. She must have been trying to act indifferent at the start, but couldn’t carry through. “Married, huh? Hey, you guys are talking about *that* Colgon, right?”

“Yeah.”

Orphen nodded and Irgitte looked up at the sky. She closed her eyes as if in prayer and then sank down over the rock she was leaning on like something had struck her down. “No way! Him? Of all people, *him*? Wow, I feel like I didn’t want to find out about that.”

“Seriously.” Leticia only groaned, keeping her shock slightly more under the surface than Irgitte’s. Still, there wasn’t a huge difference in their reactions. She had a look on her face like she wanted to laugh but couldn’t—one half of her face was slack, the other half, tense. Or maybe it was that she wanted to cry but couldn’t. There might have been something else mixed in there too.

In any case, excluding Lottecia, the sorcerers all shared an inexpressible pain before Orphen raised his voice again.

“Basically, that’s the sort of person he was to us.”

“...I feel like I sort of understand and sort of don’t.”

“Just don’t ask. I don’t think I can explain it well. None of us really knew him all that well, and nobody really tried to.” After saying that, he took a look at her and asked, “Now that I think about it, you might know him better than all of us.”

She didn’t say anything to that, instead just biting her lip.

Judging that he shouldn't probe her on that, Orphen changed the subject. "All I really know is that he's been working for this guy called the 'Lord of the Imminent Domain.' Just like Winona and Damian. We're headed for the Imminent Domain now. If it was those guys who took Claiomh and Majic, then... I can't deny that we're probably going into danger. So I guess that's why I'm decked out in all this gear."

"Why would they take Claiomh?" That was apparently the only point she was curious about.

Orphen sighed at Lottecia's question. "I have no idea. But Winona disappeared at the same time she did. Even though her role—" He corrected himself when the word got stuck in his throat. "—her mission was supposed to be escorting me to her lord up until right before then. Damian let something slip... Their plans changed somehow. That's what I think..."

Orphen looked at Irgitte and told her, "I'm guessing Stabbers from the Thirteen Apostles invading their territory is an irregularity for them. That probably messed with their plans somewhat."

"I'm not sure if I should say this, but..." Irgitte hardened her expression, but couldn't seem to do the same to her voice. "The Capital considers this lord to be extremely dangerous. At least among the court sorcerers. Enough that just mentioning him can get you in trouble. He's a noble with enough military might that not even Master Pluto can make a reckless move against him, but he's not part of the Royal Public Safety Plan. It would be an urgent problem for the Union of Lords if his existence became public knowledge. That's how significant his existence is, yet nobody knows a thing about him. He's a total mystery. It's frustrating, but I can't imagine he considers us much of a threat himself."

"I feel the same way. No matter how I think about it... there's just no reality to all this. It's like the more I hear about this lord, the less sure I am that such a person could really exist." Orphen waved his hand dismissively. "I mean, supposedly the guy's in conflict with the dragons. It can't just all be some big joke."

"Ed works for someone like that? Following his orders or something?"

"So you *don't* know all that much about Colgon, then..." Leticia piped up.

Apparently she hadn't intended her comment to be all that inflammatory. She raised her eyebrow in surprise when the conversation stopped and all eyes turned to her.

Spurred on by their looks, she hastily said, "He would never work under someone. Would he?" She must not have been completely confident, because her words were mumbled and hard to hear.

"He said he was acting at the 'behest' of his lord. He didn't say 'orders'... at least, I think," Orphen murmured, recalling his last conversation with the man. They'd spoken for only a few short minutes in Urbanrama. Colgon hadn't satisfactorily answered a single one of his questions and hadn't shared with him enough information for Orphen to make any sort of judgment call.

"Well, thinking about it won't get us any answers in this case. What we know is that there's a person referred to as a lord and he's in conflict with the dragons. Winona, an agent of his, was taking me to see him when she suddenly disappeared in the middle of the job, taking Claiomh and Majic with her. The Thirteen Apostles are threatened by him and finally sent assassins after him. Damian caused that ridiculous ghost phenomenon earlier to try to wipe them out, but it didn't work. And right now, we're headed for the Imminent Domain." He counted off on his fingers as he listed the things they knew, and at the end, added, "If we're going to be opposing the Imminent Domain, we'll have to fight the likes of Colgon and Damian. If we're *not* going to fight them and want to work together instead, we'll be pitting ourselves against Stabbers from the Thirteen Apostles. And if we don't choose a side, then... we'll probably make enemies of all of them."

"But Ed... he, well, he said something about me..." Lottecia leaned forward and murmured something, but she swiftly stopped, her words transforming into little more than breaths. She shut her mouth and backed up the same amount she'd leaned forward, hiding behind her usual somewhat unfocused expression. "I want to see him."

"So do I. This time, I'll grab him by the scruff of his neck and make him spill everything."

"You seem confident," Leticia noted.

Orphen nodded. “That guy was never that comfortable around you, right?”

“What, *I’m* doing it?!” Leticia yelled in protest, but Orphen ignored her.

He looked up at the mansion before them. “For now, we should get some answers if we just go inside.”

“You’re right,” Irgitte agreed with a frown.

“...Hmm?” Orphen mumbled, feeling a strange sensation. “Did something unnatural just happen?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m not sure, exactly...” he murmured, looking back up at the building.

It was an aged mansion that had four floors. It was dark beyond the windows, so they couldn’t learn much by peering inside them. Ivy crept up from the ground around its foundation, but it hadn’t quite reached the walls. It was a lone mansion, looking entirely out of place on the wasteland plains.

Everyone else was dead. He was the only one left. Still, he had no choice but to move forward in order to kill the man inside the mansion.

Yet again, Orphen felt a wordless question forming inside him.

He looked around. He felt like just a moment ago he’d been talking to his sister. Irgitte and Lottecia too. But there was no way... it couldn’t be.

He dragged his legs and proceeded forward.

It was the dead of night, and the wasteland winds obscured the moon. Orphen stepped toward the towering black mansion like he was sinking into a dark ravine, breathing in air that smelled like blood.



She felt like she could feel the man’s breath as they faced each other, and her fingers trembled.

There was no way—and it wasn’t just a matter of the distance between them. There was no way she could feel something like that. Lottecia clenched her teeth in denial of her discomfort. A typical sort of worry crossed through her mind, that everything she was thinking was obvious to those around her. She

wanted to tell herself that such a thing was impossible, but she didn't have the proof to shake the thought.

Her students were watching. The dojo she'd grown up in felt so much more stifling than it usually did today. Surpassing an adversary in swordplay meant controlling a wider area than your opponent. Your lunging distance, the agility of your hands, the speed of your judgment. You had to make use of all those things to expand the area of your control. Your sword would never reach an area outside of your control. If your enemy controlled a bigger area than you did, you would never be able to respond to attacks that came from that opposing area. These were blind spots.

They were even in skill, but she couldn't possibly hope to compete in stamina and physical capabilities.

But she'd been dreaming of this moment for years. No, she'd been having nightmares. Asleep and awake, she'd been thinking of ways to win against this man. That experience had to amount to something. He wouldn't have something like that. She didn't feel the weight of her sword. It was like another limb to her. To be more accurate, she'd trained herself so that she could only achieve true balance by taking up a sword.

The skies of Nashwater were clear, but that meant nothing inside the dojo. Glaring at the man who'd suddenly barged into the dojo, Lottecia tried to forget her unease. It required effort, but it wasn't impossible.

When she spoke, however, her voice cracked.

"I have my pride." The points of her teeth dug into her lips. She couldn't stop her sharp canines from tearing her skin just as much as she couldn't stop herself from continuing. "But when my father died and I was lost... I couldn't do anything. I wanted you to support me! I wanted us to support each other, even if it was fake, even if we were only going through the motions... I didn't care if it was all a lie. I just wanted a way to forget my sadness..."

"That you cling to others, unable to become your own master, is why you're an idiot."

"You don't understand yourself."

The two voices overlapped.

The overlapping voices reverberated in her ears, expanding.

“It’s meaningless. Lower your sword. I’m not there.”

“Looks like it. The sword is activated.”

“Everyone’s death is fated, apparently... but I wonder what that really means. For instance, if running into me leads to your death, maybe that’s your fate.”

“I’ll only warn you once... Next time, I’ll kill you again.”

Again.

I’ll kill you again.

As many times as it takes. Every time we meet.

Her planned death would come to pass. She would die again and again. She would face him again and again, and die again and again. She couldn’t simply choose not to meet this man. She couldn’t choose to stop chasing him.

So she was sure she would continue to die.

Her sword wavered. The wooden sword in her grip danced soundlessly.

And soundlessly, a metal blade surpassed it.

The blade passed by her sword without an impact. Her wooden sword continued forward, like it was sinking into a bottomless swamp. It pitched forward without striking anything.

Her body alone flew backward. There was a cold impact. Pain. Unbearable pain. It wasn’t pain of the skin. It went deeper than that, deeper than muscle, the worst kind of pain imaginable.

She couldn’t understand what had happened. All she knew was that she couldn’t move anymore. She thought she could hear someone screaming.

As she fell to the floor, she felt something embrace her. Sensing that it was death, Lottecia fell into a deep sleep.



“Miss Maria Huwon told me. If you don’t come back alive, she’ll kill me.”

It was the sound of the wind.

Kill!

Irgitte Sweetheart strode forward with a scream.

Kill... Kill... Kill...

She could hear the sound of the winds blowing from the sky far in the distance. One blew, then another echoed out louder. Like the stars multiplying at night, the gales grew in numbers and strength. They blew, bearing down on her pathetic existence on the earth.

There was no way she could win against a sorcerer trained for assassination and battle—this was nothing like squabbling with Leticia MacCready or poor Azalie. She could think that she'd snapped her opponent's neck, but she would be the one to find herself dead. That was an assassin battle. She had to move a second faster than her enemy and end their life in that one moment. What she needed was skill, power, accuracy, tactics, knowledge, resolve, luck... plenty of things. She added one more to the list. A necessity no textbook would list—the wind. Listening to this sound of the wind.

There was no wind that blew wildly. She knew that. She listened to the sound. All she heard was the sound. She closed off her mind, her body alone silently moving. She didn't have enough blood to continue pushing forward, and as she writhed, her senses dulling, she just kept screaming. With the wind. A silent scream that didn't exist.

She gripped the broken sword in her hand. She'd stolen this saber from her enemy. It was a heavy weapon, difficult to wield. An extremely primitive weapon, immature when compared to sorcery—she recalled the voice that had warned her to arm herself, though she couldn't remember who it was that had given her that warning. Why did she need such a thing? Sorcerers had their sorcery. They had a weapon that surpassed all other weaponry. That was all they needed. And she had that.

Why did she need an inferior weapon? She'd solved the mystery. This was a challenge to surpass death. Death was right before her eyes, she'd lost her sorcery, and she still needed to kill her enemy, so she needed this weapon. She had to kill even if she was about to die.

She was going to die.

That contradicted a sorcerer's ideal!

The wind blew. Its eddies whipped the weight of the air against her. A wind that didn't exist. A scream that didn't exist.

"I...!"

Her voice could not possibly leave her throat, so when it hit the air, it naturally became nothing more than a cough. A pool of blood spilled from her mouth. It spilled out without stopping.

She no longer even existed.

That was only obvious, since she'd died.



"...A seer's trap. Classic white sorcery," Leticia murmured, ignoring the images.

It wasn't just images, though. The experience overwhelmed all five of her senses. She felt it compelling her to act as well. Even if she knew it was fiction, it took extreme self-control to ignore it. In fact, it was normally impossible for a human being to do so.

She observed the phenomena the sorcery was causing to her own body as if it were someone else's until...

"Why does it not work on you? How baffling."

She'd been expecting to get a response. It was nothing significant. She was the only one who could fight this enemy. She knew that.

Because she was the only one, she needed to draw this enemy's attention to her.

Carefully confirming that she was still maintaining her composure, she asked back, "Is it?"

"It doesn't seem to be *wholly* ineffective, however. You're seeing your own future right now, are you not? But there's another power pulling your mind back to the current moment. I feel that power. You're another user rivaling me,

aren't you? Who are you? How could you escape my sight?"

"You seem to have the wrong idea. You're not the strongest sorcerer on the continent," she told him.

Her opponent's voice too was calmer than she expected.

"I feel no vanity. I've been removed from such physical desires and emotions for some time now. The title merely exists as the truth and is true for that reason."

"I'll tell you the new truth, then. Fight me for the seat of the most powerful caster. And this isn't vanity. It's bravery."

"Leticia MacCready. The way you act like you understand everything saddens me to see. It's like the struggling of the weak."

"You should admonish this lord of yours in the same way."

"Your power should not be enough to resist me. I freely control you."

He'd taken the bait. Leticia smiled, sure of that. Even cheap provocation worked. This man couldn't let anything of the sort slide.

"But you can't, so you're agitated. To borrow your turn of phrase, that exists as the truth and is true for that reason, isn't it?"

"You may not have fallen for the trap, but you realize that isolates you even more, do you not? You have to save the whole lot of them all by yourself. The future that awaits you for that reason... You're likely seeing it at this very moment."

There was no need for her to respond to his provocation. Leticia shook her head. "It's just an illusion you've created."

"It isn't. Controlling time is not all that difficult for me. Both stopping time and rewinding it are not as difficult as you think. I can control time with the same amount of effort you use to control space."

"Even if this really is my future, it's nothing that bothers me."

"Are you sure? I wonder if that's truly the case. Let me make a prediction. According to my plans, six people will die. Everyone who will not be needed for

the coming battle will be wiped out. And you are one of those six.”

“Your suggestions won’t work on me.”

“Forte Puckingham fell. Of course, he’s not dead... It’s difficult for me to kill living beings with my powers. But his consciousness has been cut off. He’s in a vegetative state. I assume he was the one who gave you the powers of the Network, but you can’t expect any more assistance from him.”

“I’m not expecting anything from him. I never have, and I never will.”

“Well, if I can’t control you with the power of your future, then my only option is to make your death real with the violence that exists in the present...”

The voice stopped there. She understood that the conversation had ended only when the images stopped—nothing had changed. They weren’t moving anymore. She alone existed in a single point on the plains, sitting down and chatting.

It was just her. There was no one else. Not Krylancelo, not Irgitte, and not that girl either.

For the first time, she felt her heart beating. Something cold ran down her spine. But...

No... This isn’t right. It’s not what I’m supposed to do. She closed her eyes and told herself that.

She had to win. She wasn’t allowed to die.

Death... Six people would die.

Leticia thought to herself, confirming what she knew. If she was one of those six, then there were five more.

The white sorcerer working for the lord of the Imminent Domain... The people who would present a problem to him are me and the three from the Thirteen Apostles...

Who were the last two on Damian Rue’s list?

Chapter III: Third Whisper of Death

“I have something I’d like you to do.”

At this point, he wasn’t surprised by the suddenness of the words. Orphen turned around and caught sight of a man who had absolutely not been there a moment ago.

He had the appearance of a man, at least. Maybe it was pointless to worry about the genetic differences of a person who no longer physically existed, of course. He was a white sorcerer who had escaped the shackles of his physical form and become nothing more than a spirit.

Orphen stopped and looked around. Staring at the white sorcerer, Damian Rue, Orphen muttered, “Why am I alone?”

His memories were confused. He had no idea how much of what he remembered was real, but he felt anxious, like he’d just woken up from an incredibly realistic dream. He closed his mouth, but before Damian could say anything, he found himself mumbling once again. “Where was I going?”

“I’ve sealed your future sight. I don’t want to harm your spirit for the time being.”

“Future sight?” Orphen repeated the unusual words.

Either Damian didn’t want him to know or he trusted Orphen’s imagination to figure it out. He didn’t explain anything but instead went on, “I wanted to speak to you alone so I took control of you temporarily and transported you here. I’m sure the other three were shocked by your sudden disappearance.”

“Why just me?” As he asked, he made sure of his physical condition. He couldn’t think of any other way to make sure of what had been real and what had been a dream. No, he could still be in a dream right now.

He can control someone who’s been trained to resist white sorcery that easily? Orphen questioned bitterly. He probably could. *This* white sorcerer, at least. He was on a different level.

He used his hands to check his gear. He was wearing his combat uniform and equipment from the Tower. The gun was still in his holster. He was perfectly equipped. His defenses included leather, steel, and blade-resistant fibers. And inside those defenses was a powerless human who would utilize a weapon.

Damian was looking at him like he was a speck of dirt on his shoe.

He returned the white sorcerer's gaze and asked him, "No, first of all, what do you think you're doing? Weren't you supposed to take me to your lord?"

"I do have an explanation as to that point. I was forced to rethink things when you joined forces with those of the Thirteen Apostles."

"We were caught up in the same trouble. Of course we joined forces."

"That was Winona's mistake. I apologize on her behalf. I could not take you to safety in time. All I had to do was delay the assassins from reaching my lord... I eliminated the ghost phenomenon when I realized you had gotten caught up in it."

"You said the situation had changed earlier."

His story wasn't completely unbelievable, but Orphen still couldn't swallow it all that easily. Orphen put himself on guard just enough that his adversary wouldn't be able to sense it as he felt an apprehension he couldn't ignore.

Damian responded unperturbed. "It has. Our enemy is more formidable than we expected. And we are still without our trump card, Yuis."

"Colgon?"

"I believe I told you already that I couldn't contact Yuis. And for reasons I don't understand, the Network suddenly can't account for two assassins of the Thirteen Apostles as well."

That didn't sound like much of an issue to him. Orphen frowned and asked, "Well, the Network isn't perfect, right? Forte always said it wasn't strange for irregularities to occur at any time."

"For a mere coincidence, it all seems to be putting us at rather a convenient disadvantage."

"Us," Damian had said. He knew it was meaningless to focus on something

like that, but Orphen couldn't help finding it strange anyway. He wasn't being included in that "us," was he? The white sorcerer should have been able to read his thoughts, but he continued on blithely as if unaware of them.

"At this rate, there is a chance the assassins will reach my lord."

"...You seem to have forgotten, so let me remind you. Claiomh and Majic were kidnapped and I still haven't heard an explanation for that."

"The safest place in the Imminent Domain is my lord's mansion."

Mansion. For whatever reason, the word resounded unpleasantly in his mind.

But before he could figure out why, Damian's words continued.

"For the time being, we took those with no battle capabilities into our protection there."

"Without asking?"

"I'm sure you would have opposed it had we told you."

"Of course I would. And I'm sure you didn't think I'd be more agreeable if you asked after the fact," Orphen grumbled.

Damian continued on, unruffled. "I was hoping you could serve as a replacement for Yuis."

Orphen gave him a wry smile and told him, "You must be joking. Put a bow on it if you want, but they're hostages. Our 'deal' in Urbanrama was the same. Are you not capable of asking a favor of someone without a firm grip on a weakness of theirs?"

"I am not." This time he spoke plainly without pretense.

All Orphen could do was sigh. He paused for a moment, pretending to consider the other man's words while he gauged the distance between them. He knew there was no point in punching him. Actually, he didn't even know if he *could* punch him. But that didn't matter. As long as he could spoil the other man's mood somewhat. By the time he was finished calculating, however, he'd cooled down.

A question came to mind then. He supposed it didn't really matter either way,

but... he found himself asking nonetheless.

“If you were taking them under your protection, why didn’t you take Lottecia too?”

“Hmm?” Damian cocked his head amicably. “I did intend to, of course. But we have our hands full as well, you see...”

He felt like something was hiding within Damian’s expression. Orphen frowned, unable to ascertain what it was. There was one thing he could say, at least.

He’s lying about something... Is it one thing or two? Or more?

He needed to find that out, but this white sorcerer himself wouldn’t provide any clues.

“So, will you do me this favor?”

Fuck off. It didn’t take Orphen all that much self-control to swallow the words he wanted to say. If he wanted to stop the Thirteen Apostles before they created any unnecessary victims, then it wasn’t a bad idea to join forces with the Imminent Domain people. The problem was his personal feelings on the matter.

If I could just trust these guys... He cursed to himself, knowing he was asking too much.

“Well, it’s not like I have any other options,” Orphen told Damian.

The white sorcerer simply pointed in a certain direction. There was no difference in the scenery no matter which way you faced in this wasteland, but he opened his mouth and said, “If you walk roughly thirty minutes in this direction, you should be able to meet up with Winona. Rely on her for matters of geography. She is not our only agent, of course. You should work with her to avoid any unnecessary clashes. Most of our people do not have any way to tell you and the Thirteen Apostles sorcerers apart.”

“...And Tish and Irgitte?”

“I’ll have another subordinate of mine meet them.”

That must have been the sum of his business. Damian promptly vanished.

Orphen glared at the spot his conversation partner had been standing in for a time before turning to the direction Damian had indicated—there was nothing there. The unchanged wasteland extended out before him, nothing to block his path.

“Well, then...” Orphen murmured, walking off. “You separate us and try to manipulate me... I have no way to resist these guys other than my lack of trust in them. Dammit, they’re treating me like a kid.”



Observing them for several years led him to one simple conclusion—they were brilliant soldiers.

These were difficult human resources to come by. Just like brilliant office workers, brilliant gardeners, or brilliant nurses. However, they weren’t quite what he’d call brilliant sorcerers. When it came to a sorcerer’s brilliance, their skill level had to be taken into account. Something that had nothing to do with the person’s nature was all that mattered. It wasn’t so for soldiers. What made them brilliant was their results. What abilities they wielded mattered little. All that mattered was what missions they were given and whether or not they were able to carry them out.

In that sense—Damian Rue searched his memories once more—they were brilliant soldiers. He couldn’t hope for better.

Ride was almost forty and looked like he wasn’t suited for a job like this anymore. Half of his head was bald, but this wasn’t just because of his age. It was the result of a burn he’d gotten on his first mission and a skin graft that had just barely saved his life. He was plump, and his movements were noticeably slow. Even now, he clumsily wore an artless longsword by a cord tied to its sheath. His limbs were short, so if he wore a sheath of that size at his belt, he wouldn’t be able to draw the sword. Wholeheartedly toying with the cord tied to his sheath, this man knew better than anyone how to thrust his sword into his opponents’ vital spots at the shortest possible distance.

Unlike Ride, who didn’t care much about the outside world, the young Trinky was restlessly glancing about, this way and that. He was twenty-one or twenty-two, if Damian recalled. In just one year, he’d murdered over sixty armed

thieves, and after being sentenced to death in the court, their lord had appointed him a dispatch officer at his own discretion. Tired of killing people, the young man had readily agreed to the post. And, since he didn't feel fear for a moment in their battle with the sanctuary, he was a valuable pawn for their lord. Their interests coincided, and so he was here.

Once again observing the two Dragoons, Damian came to the same conclusion he had before. They were brilliant soldiers. They would carry out their missions exactly as he hoped. He could only give this order to them. They were likely the only ones who could do it.

So he would use them and throw them away. That was the only option he had.

"So?" As if he'd read Damian's mind—not that it would particularly surprise him if he had—Trinky spoke up, taking a nervous breath before he continued. "Are you retrieving us?" No doubt he had already predicted Damian's answer.

Damian responded with the obvious answer, his tone businesslike. "Don't get the wrong idea. Our war with the sanctuary has already begun. I can't concern myself with your lives all the time."

"Of course not." Trinky smiled.

"...Pretty soon, I won't be able to say who will live and who will die," Damian continued. "Once the small skirmishes are over, the all-out war will begin." He paused. "Your task is to buy time until then."

"That's awfully motivating," came a nasally voice. This was Ride. He was still toying with his sheath cord, not looking up at Damian. He wasn't tying the sheath to his belt, but seemed to just want to tie the cord into a bow to get it out of the way. Such a simple task took several minutes for his fingers, shaky with alcoholism, to complete.

"Do you have a complaint?" Damian asked.

Ride continued trying to tie the bow. One loop kept coming loose, and his gaze made it hard to tell if he was actually watching what he was doing. "Nope. Those are strange orders, though. You want us to finish off the Tower of Fangs sorcerer? Not the Thirteen Apostles ones?"

“Winona’s team will handle the assassins—the Thirteen Apostles sorcerers.”

“Just her?” Ride asked, though he didn’t look particularly interested in the answer. Still, since he’d asked, he must have cared at least a bit.

Damian softly disagreed. “Her team.”

“She’s only ever worked on her own. Up until now, that is,” Trinky commented. His lips were curled up as if he was smiling, but he twisted them down as he added, “Just like that assassin bastard. Those two have no concept of teamwork.”

He must have meant Yuis. Damian opened his mouth to respond. He didn’t need to do so, but if he neglected these physical gestures, it would affect the morale of his men. “Winona is working with a newly scouted sorcerer. Don’t get involved with anyone traveling with her. I can’t have him finding out about you two.”

“So you want us to act in secret from this guy?”

“That’s right.”

“We only need to kill one person?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh, one more thing.” Ride finally turned to face him. He still hadn’t finished his bow. “Can I drink when I finish this mission?”

“Do as you like,” Damian told him and teleported away.



He found Winona easily. He couldn’t imagine he’d walked for thirty minutes, but he got the feeling he probably had—right down to the second. Damian Rue’s voice remained, vexingly, in his ear.

Roughly thirty minutes in this direction...

Shaking off the thought with a wry smile, Orphen waited for Winona to notice him. She was walking quickly forward, Orphen approaching her from behind and to her right. There was still some distance between them. He wasn’t sure whether she’d hear him over the wind if he called out to her. The winds

whipping across the plains like a scream were growing louder with each passing moment.

Let's see. That Dragoon...

Winona. She was a large woman with a sharply honed physicality. An agent that worked for a specific noble only. If she was nothing more than hired muscle, then she wouldn't be any trouble. But she wasn't overconfident in her abilities. In fact, she seemed to be unsatisfied with them. If they had a hand-to-hand match, Orphen wasn't honestly sure if he could go toe to toe with her.

The dispatch police were a fundamental organization to the Royal Public Safety Plan. They acted outside of the autonomy of individual cities. The anti-bandit force of the dispatch police arrested—or rather, exterminated—the armed thieves that were rampant outside of city borders. She was almost definitely a former member, though he had no idea what sort of strange circumstances had led to her working for some suspicious lord instead.

A brawny knight. *Do I have some trump card that can beat her?* Orphen wondered as he quietly sped up and closed the distance between them.

Capturing her was something he could do. It might even be easy, and not require taking her by surprise. The problem was whether or not that would lead to getting the information he needed from her.

She probably won't spill anything even if I kill her. There's no way for me to win this game. They're all cheating.

On the other side of a table full of tricks, this lord was laughing without even showing his face. Orphen scoffed, picturing that.

No. I'm not the lord's true enemy. The lord doesn't benefit at all from my defeat. What they're going up against is the dragons' sanctuary, and all the lord wants is to use me as some kind of pawn in his strategy...

If he lost sight of that, he wouldn't even be able to play in the game anymore. The enemy had Claiomh and Majic. He'd been separated from Leticia and Irgitte. He hadn't even obtained the information on Azalie that they had originally promised him. He couldn't quit at this point.

There wasn't any way for him to win, because he was nothing more than a

piece on the board. All the pieces could do was fulfill their roles.

So that's what she meant by roles... Dammit. He groaned, remembering what Leticia had said. *I get it. If I don't decide what my own role is, I'm stuck as a pawn and I can't do anything. Azalie, Claiomh, and Majic are all pieces he's set up too.*

Claiomh and Majic would come back to him safely as long as he did his job as a pawn. He was sure of that.

He had no choice but to play along with these tricks. Even if he knew it was a trap. Until some irregularity occurred, no matter how small.

Winona noticed him and stopped.

She didn't raise her hand in greeting or anything but just looked at him, displeased. She was wearing half of her armor and the skin of her brow was pulled into a tight arch. There were no smiles to be had, as if she felt he was wasting her time by making her wait for him.

When he was finally close enough for her voice to reach him, she said simply, "What, you can't run?"

Orphen jogged over to her.

She must not have been expecting him to take her seriously. Winona blinked and then jeered when she realized what he was doing. But by that point, Orphen had already closed the distance between them to an arm's length.

He leaped, stretching his whole body with the movement. His fist thrust out and stabbed into her face. Taken by surprise, Winona was forced to step backward.

But she didn't fall. She stumbled back a few steps, then regained her balance and counterattacked with no hesitation.

Orphen had already landed. He didn't need to take a fighting stance. From a distance that would normally be safe, Winona lifted her leg up high. More than a wary beast, the sight made him think of a log flying at him. Her speed was that of a beast, though.

He pulled back and dodged. Should he lunge before her next attack or wait

another moment? There was no need to make things complicated; he stayed put. Winona, who'd gotten her nose caved in in a surprise attack, stepped forward and thrust her fist out—it was a quick, by-the-book move, unlike her earlier kick. Still, it was probably strong enough to knock someone out. Orphen stepped back once more. Her obviously thick fist passed by his face, grazing it.

Orphen made to step back once more and leaped to the side instead. It was the most basic of feints. Falling for it, Winona stepped forward again and went pale when she realized what had happened.

Normally, this would be the end of their little match. He would remove himself from his enemy's sight, then close in from their blind spot to deal a killing blow.

However...

Winona's fist prevented him from doing that. Her right arm whipped out at him and as he was brushed aside, he confirmed that she wasn't looking his way. She'd likely attacked him on pure instinct, sensing his presence.

If my guard had been down, I'd have been the one taken out, huh... Quietly admitting that to himself, Orphen emotionlessly pulled her arm close to him. Twisting it at the joint, he sent a kick at her leg. Winona sank down with a sound like a tree trunk snapping.

He brought her down, a tight hold on her joint, and told her, "Depending on how truthful you are, it'll either be your dominant arm or goodbye forever. Now, which will it be?"

"Damian will come collect me before you can break my arm. Then, he'll just kill you."

"He's not coming. He's got his hands full with the Thirteen Apostles right now."

He was just guessing, but from the pained sound spilling from between Winona's teeth, it didn't seem like what he'd said was all that unbelievable. She spoke with as much strength as she could muster with her face pressed into the ground. "You think I'll talk just 'cause of a broken arm?"

"How about in exchange for your life?"

“You’ll kill me?” As he expected, she just scoffed at him.

Orphen sighed quietly, so she wouldn’t hear, and pulled out his gun from its holster as he held her arm down with one hand.

He held it in front of her face and could tell that she’d seen it when her body twitched.

Orphen did his best to leave any trace of emotion from his voice as he asked her, “You know what this is, don’t you? It has nothing to do with how I feel about killing. This is that kind of weapon. My trembling finger can take a life just by ever so slightly touching the trigger. This can turn cowards into killers. It’s that kind of weapon... Ah, and you have one too, don’t you? Move your left hand.” He glared at the hand that was inching closer to the holster on her hip.

“The next time you move that hand, I’ll shoot you through the shoulder. And if you keep trying, it’ll be your back next. You’ll lose a couple of your organs. Lastly, I’ll shoot you in the head. There’s zero chance that your brain will withstand the impact of the bullet. But if you answer my questions, I won’t have to waste the ammunition.”

“If those bullets are meant for my lord, then they’ll just end up in my body later anyway. Doesn’t matter if it happens a bit early.”

“Well, if that’s how you want it to be... I’m sure you’ll answer though, so I’m asking. Are Claiomh and Majic safe?”

After a short silence, Winona slowly answered, “Is that all you want to know? ...They’re safe. What reason would we have to harm them?”

“Well, I’d like to believe that, at least. Next, why is Colgon missing?”

This question, she answered swiftly. “I don’t know. Yuis doesn’t work for our lord. Sometimes, he goes missing. This isn’t the first time.”

Considering her words, Orphen asked his final question. “Are you planning on killing the Thirteen Apostles assassins?”

“...What are you even saying? If an assassin snuck onto your property, would you just let them leave?”

“To me, they’re not assassins.”

“You think they might be allies of yours?” she asked cynically.

Orphen released her arm and stepped two paces back. He thought she might attack him, but Winona just sat up, rubbing the arm he’d been holding.

Holstering his gun, he told her, “That’s right. They might be. I have no way of judging the situation until I have a proper conversation with this lord of yours.”

Winona didn’t answer that, instead rubbing her nose as if she’d just remembered getting struck there. She wasn’t bleeding. Orphen had struck her with all his might, but it hadn’t seemed to have much of an effect. Either that or it *had* had an effect, but she was doing everything she could to make it seem like it hadn’t.

After some time, she finally turned to face him, hiding her left hand from him. The left hand that held her gun. “If you’re going to say something like that, then you shouldn’t have let me go. Are you planning on becoming an assassin yourself?”

“I’m not. And I’m not planning on letting the Thirteen Apostles assassinate anyone either.” Orphen shrugged. “If Damian’s the final hurdle in front of your lord, then I have no way of getting past him anyway.”

“...Really?” The look in her eye seemed to shift ever so slightly, though Orphen had no way of knowing if it hinted at her true feelings or just another lie.



In any case, all he could do was smile wryly. “I mean, he’s a ghost. How do you kill something that’s already dead?”

“Yuis—” The tone of her voice dropped heavily. The faint smile on her face slipped away. “Yuis interacts more with Damian than anyone else among us. Sometimes I think... maybe he’s looking for a way to do just that.”

That was unexpected. Orphen showed his surprise openly as he asked, “So you’re not a monolith, then?”

“No organization is,” she said as she stood. She raised her gaze slightly and went on without patting the dust from her clothes, “I won’t hide it. Damian’s a strange one. All of us agree on that. I think so too. Our lord... must think the same way.”

“Then why have you left him alone?” Orphen asked. Winona responded with just the answer he’d been expecting.

“Because he’s more useful than anyone in a fight. Doesn’t sit right with any of us, but we have no choice but to admit it. We need him if we’re fighting the sanctuary.”

“He’s probably listening to us right now, you know.”

“Even if he is, he won’t care. We don’t have any way to kill him, after all.”

Cheating. Everyone playing this game was cheating, Orphen thought to himself as he watched Winona.

From the beginning, he hadn’t expected she’d answer his questions honestly. But if he listened to her lies *knowing* they were lies, that, too, would be information.

He’d been able to get more information than he was expecting to. At the very least, he knew now that Winona was someone he could try to make a deal with. That might come in handy once he decided to stop being a piece on the board.

Once this cheating game ended... “*If I chant it, I wonder what will happen?*” Colgon’s words suddenly revived in his mind.

Orphen opened his mouth and words spilled from it as if on their own. “For now, I’ll help you apprehend the Thirteen Apostles assassins. I can’t guarantee

I'll work with you forever, though."

"Sounds awfully convenient for you."

"Terms should be favorable for me every so often."

With that, Orphen looked out over the wasteland that extended as far as his eyes could see. The board for this rigged game. And his opponent wasn't even showing where his king was on the board.

Chapter IV: Fourth Strategy of Death

“They’re more defenseless than I was expecting.”

“...Yeah.”

The assassins wasted a few seconds on that short exchange. One crouched down next to a corpse and examined it for a moment before standing again. The assassin with the shaved head gave the corpse a final glance.

It was nothing of particular import. A man had died and stopped moving. That was all. A protector of their target, the lord of the Imminent Domain.

The other assassin, a young man sitting blithely atop a nearby rock, enjoying the breeze, spoke up. “If it was going to be this easy, maybe we should have taken action sooner. Master Pluto and Master Kurabe are cautious at the strangest times.”

The man with the shaved head responded, his tone cold and subdued. “Hard to say when almost none of the spies we’ve sent here have come back alive.”

“Well, you can’t expect much from hired thugs and rogue killers, can you?”

“Some of them were Stabbers more skilled than me.” The older man turned to look at the younger one. “And more skilled than you, Kakorkist Isthian.”

The young man called Kakorkist jumped down from the rock with a childish flourish and smiled. He shrugged, lifting his empty hands up and said, “I can’t imagine that’s true. Master Pluto is greedy, and he always saves what he wants most for last. Enough that he misses out sometimes. The people who were used up before us were used up precisely because that was how much they were worth, no? This time too, he removed Maria Huwon from the running.”

“I can’t laugh about that.”



“I plan on going home alive, you know. We’ll take care of this lord guy, escape with our lives, and return to the capital. I won’t be satisfied until I give that tyrant a piece of my mind.” Kakorkist muttered the words like they were a joke, but his tone made it clear that they were not.

Seek Marrisk took a good look at his student and swallowed what he was about to say. “Don’t think about such pointless things. You have issues focusing on your tasks.” With eyes concentrated on death, the eyes of an assassin, he said to him, “The sun’s about to set. We’ll find the lord before morning and kill him. Our stamina won’t hold out if we take any longer.”

“If we consider escaping afterward, we’ll want to finish up in the middle of the night, won’t we?”

Seek didn’t respond to his pupil’s suggestion.



“Want to guess whether I’m lying or telling the truth?”

Winona’s sudden words were unexpected. She’d barely said a thing for nearly an hour now. Orphen recalled the few words she’d said to him up until this point. “This way.” “Not that way.” “Keep moving.” “Shut up.”

Compared to that, she was being downright friendly. Orphen turned to her dubiously and grunted, “Hunh?”

“Why do you think my lord lives in a wasteland like this?”

“I’m not interested,” Orphen told her bluntly.

Still, Winona went on. She didn’t care. She must have just wanted to talk. “My lord is humanity’s guardian deity.”

“Is that so?” She was messing with him. Orphen looked at Winona irritably... then stopped. Her face was completely sincere.

Winona didn’t stop. Continuing forward, she went on, “You should get to know more about him. We want as many people who can fight against dragons as we can get. If you can understand him and talk with him, I’m sure you’ll feel like joining us.”

Watching her pass him by, Orphen waited a moment before continuing on as well. The scenery around them hadn't changed at all, but Winona walked on without hesitation. This must have been like her backyard. "So what's this guardian deity's reason for fighting the sanctuary? Humans and dragons have never once been in conflict before, you know."

He couldn't still say he was uninterested—any information on the lord, he wanted.

Winona answered him swiftly, as if this was a favorite conversation topic. "What about the sorcerer hunts?"

"Sure, sorcerers and dragons were in conflict, but the rest of humanity was either on the dragons' side or just observing."

"Since that age, the dragons have holed up in the sanctuary, isolating themselves from the outer world. Even generously speaking, they don't want anything to do with us. My lord thinks the sanctuary is betraying the outside world." Winona was full of confidence as she spoke.

Orphen grimaced. "Aren't you just stirring up a hornet's nest?"

"You think so? What do you think about the existence of Doppel X, then? The sanctuary sends operatives out to commit all sorts of covert shenanigans. Just so you know, Helpart was nothing but a grunt to them."

Orphen sped up to catch up to her. When they were walking side by side, she didn't slow down, but she didn't speed up either.

Orphen's back still hurt when he remembered that Red Dragon. Supposedly he'd defeated the dragon himself, but the last few moments of their encounter hadn't felt real. Those weren't memories he particularly wanted to hold on to in the first place.

"You'll never get to the end of it if you try to figure out who started it," Orphen told her quietly.

"Doppel X has been doing what they like in the outside world for over a hundred years. We still don't know their motivations, but as for their aim... I'd say it's plunder."

“Plunder?” Orphen groaned at the unexpected word.

Winona went on cheerily, as if she’d scored a point or something. “You saw it in Nashwater, didn’t you? How many people they killed for one sword.”

“Yeah... I guess it’s true that I still don’t know what that was all about. I figured there was just something special about Lottecia’s sword.”

He’d given up on thinking about it, since no amount of thinking would allow him to understand that incident.

Winona shrugged her large shoulders. “There’s nothing. At least, not according to Yuis’s investigation—it’s just a sword that’s a little more convenient to use. So it shouldn’t have mattered if they took it. Especially since Helpart was after it; normally, we shouldn’t have gotten involved. We can’t waste our fighting strength, after all.”

“...So why was Colgon protecting the sword for half a year?”

“It’s what he wanted to do, I guess. He wanted that sword for himself. And it wasn’t a bad deal for us. Yuis is the only one who could go up against a Red Dragon anyway, so it would have been fine if he’d taken Helpart out. Plus, he had a different mission to take care of.”

“A mission?” He was curious about her wording, since it implied that Colgon was working for their lord, but apparently, she’d meant something else by it.

With a smirk, she said, “I can’t tell you the details of our missions, you understand. If you want to know, you’ll have to swear your loyalty to my lord and ask him yourself.”

That was that, apparently. Orphen sighed so that she could hear it and told her, “I see. I’ve got no idea whether you’re lying or telling the truth.”

“You’re a real snide guy, you know that?” Winona said coldly.

“It’s just my nature.” There’s no one worse to lie to than someone who doesn’t tell the truth. As he was thinking such things, Winona spoke up to stop him.

“My lord’s doing everyone a favor without any of them knowing it. He’s the only one fighting against the sanctuary. All the Sorcerers’ Association and the

Union of Lords will do is run from the dragons. Am I wrong?"

"Why don't you guess whether *I'm* lying or telling you the truth," Orphen said, narrowing his eyes at her. "My master was also called Doppel X a long time ago."

"Hmm?" She probably didn't know what he meant. It was no wonder. There was no point in explaining it, and even if there was, he didn't intend to do so. It was a private matter.

Ignoring her lack of comprehension, Orphen averted his gaze. "That's why I'm more interested in the meaning of the phrase. Doppel X, the symbol of betrayal. If the agents of the sanctuary are working for its sake, that name doesn't make sense, does it?"

"I can't imagine that matters all that much," Winona said with a snort.

Orphen kept speaking as ideas came to him. "Fanatics don't think of questions as questions. If they can believe in something, more power to them."

"...Are you talking about me?" Winona's voice instantly turned icy. Well, that was only natural.

Orphen walked over the unchanging ground. There was no reason for him to stop. Still, he naturally found himself doing just that, standing across from Winona. Watching her burly shoulders rising, he told her, "If your lord gets his kicks from squabbling with the sanctuary, then I can't trust him."

"My lord's views—"

Orphen cut off Winona's shout and continued, "Urbanrama was almost destroyed."

"But we stopped the dragons! That was a big victory."

"*I* crushed Helpart and *Claiomh* stopped Ryan. What exactly did you guys do?" Orphen asked quickly.

Winona's silence stretched on so long, Orphen thought his words might have been drowned out by the wind.

She finally said to him, "My lord has his reasons. If you met him, you would understand."

“I doubt that. You want to know the first reason I can’t accept your lord?” Even he found it comical to be grabbing the lapel of someone who was so much bigger than him, but his emotions were boiling over and he couldn’t stop himself. He felt feelings he couldn’t suppress bubbling in his throat as he raised his voice. “You people made Claiomh kill Ryan!”

“That’s all you—” Winona fell before she finished speaking. No, she’d tried to get out of his grip and in that moment, he’d shoved her.

Orphen stepped on her knee before she could get up. He looked down at her on the ground and told her, “I’ll meet your lord. I have plenty of things I want to say to him, after all. But let this serve as a warning. *Don’t* try to brainwash me. You’ll only piss me off.”

“...I get it.”

Orphen moved his foot when he heard Winona’s pained grunt. He had just about enough time to regain his cool while she was standing up. He waited, changing the angle of his gaze to match hers as she rose.

Right before she raised her face, Winona seemed to stop for a moment. Then she turned to Orphen and said, “Damian just contacted me. That girl’s nearby. He wants us to secure her immediately.”

“Girl?”

“Lottecia.”



If given a reason she could accept, she wouldn’t mind never awakening again. Well, maybe that wasn’t entirely true...

Lottecia opened her eyes, unable to recall why she was lying on the ground. Brushing the sand from her face—she was facedown on the ground—she looked around. She took a deep breath to drive out the formless ache nesting in her head and tried to remember. Not even what she was trying to remember remained in her memories, however.

Even if it was a nightmare, it was pointless to concern herself with dreams. She scolded herself. She was sick of bad dreams.

She stood up and nearly tripped. Looking at her feet, her gaze fell on the sword. The magic sword left behind by her father. Freak Diamond.

She must have fallen on top of the sword. There was a straight line from her hips to her chest that hurt. She peeked under her clothes to see if it had left a bruise, but there was no mark. Only the pain remained.

No...? Suddenly, she recalled something. That pain seemed to mean something else. There was no basis for that feeling, but she had a memory of this. Of that pain. There was no mark that she could see, but...

“What an unpleasant coincidence...”

She finally remembered with a groan. The pain, which was gradually fading, was right over the scar where Ed had cut her.

As the memory revived in her mind, so did the pain. She bit her lip, picking up her sword.

She should think about something else. Following that logic, she muttered to herself, “Why am I alone?”

No one answered her because no one else was there.

At least as far as she could see, there was no sign of anyone else’s presence. She couldn’t see the sorcerers anywhere, but she had no recollection of parting with them. She was just on the ground suddenly, by herself.

Had something knocked her down? She frowned, unconvinced. She’d heard of people being knocked out and losing their memory of the attack. They didn’t want to admit to the fact that they’d had such violence inflicted on them and sealed away their memories of it as a result. Was it her father who’d told her that...?

She smiled bitterly. She couldn’t handle being attacked? Was she so innocent? She’d escaped death after her former husband had killed her.

What I need to get stronger is... Lottecia thought to herself. What she needed to get stronger was the presence of mind not to panic every time she was in a situation like this. She needed to endeavor to understand her situation, make conjectures, and find a resolution.

She should consider it convenient that she was on her own now. She didn't know any of the details, but those sorcerers were all old friends of Ed's. There was a good chance they would side against her when she tried to kill him.

Clutching the magic sword to her, she hardened her resolve.

Ed was a sorcerer too. She needed to understand that. He had several different names and played all sorts of different roles. Yuis... Colgon... Ed. Apparently, he was a talented sorcerer. His sword skills also far surpassed hers. Even back at the dojo, the only person who could fight him on equal footing was her father—and only for a short time, since he took ill soon after. He'd let her get in one hit out of three in front of the other students, but this wasn't all that unusual. Lottecia herself had let students get hits in on her every so often in order to give them some confidence. In any case, she'd never won a match against him.

If she came at him normally, she wouldn't win. But what if she knew how to use this sword...? *That might be enough.*

Beedo Crewbstar's magic sword. Her father had used this sword to mow down dozens of armed bandits at once. At least, according to the rumors she'd heard. Maybe it was a weapon that could surpass sorcery. If she had any hope of defeating Ed, it lay with this sword.

But... how do I use it? She had no idea. Just once, in Urbanrama, she'd succeeded in drawing the sword from its sheath. No, she wasn't even sure if she could call it that. But in the end, she still had no idea how to use the sword.

She held the sword up and concentrated, though she had no idea if there was some sort of spell she should be chanting. She willed the sword to undergo some change, but several seconds went by and nothing happened.

With a sigh, she lowered the sword. If she took that much time while facing off against Ed, he'd have already killed her.

Since she'd looked up to try to use the sword, something caught her eye then. It was nothing more than a small black dot akin to a grain of sand in the wastes spread out before her, but it took the form of a familiar creature sitting on the ground some distance away from her.

She felt her heart pounding as if she'd been seen doing something underhanded. She jogged forward, thinking not of the name of this creature, but of the person she associated it with. *Claiomh?*



He wasn't that far away. He sat unmoving, as if the gales couldn't be bothered to blow against him. He looked like a puppy with jet-black fur. His shining green eyes were focused, not budging, in one direction.

It was uncanny, like an unmoving doll or stuffed beast. She got close enough to touch him, but he still didn't look up at her. Lottecia reached out hesitantly, still holding the sword to her.

"What's wrong?" She felt it was ridiculous to ask a question of an animal, but she recalled Claiomh talking to this dog often.

But the creature—its name was Leki, she recalled—still didn't move. Lottecia cleared her throat, thinking that perhaps he hadn't heard her, and moved around to Leki's front.

He turned to face her. That pair of green eyes focused intently on her.

"Hey, where's Claiomh—"

She heard an explosion, and her vision went black.



"...Hunh?"

Orphen blinked at the sound of Winona's dopey voice. There was a huge crater from an explosion in front of them. At its rim stood Lottecia, a drawn sword at her side.

It was exactly as they had been informed. Lottecia was there. That was why they had come. She was standing stock-still with her eyes wide open, but she hadn't noticed them. It was like she'd passed out standing up. But that likely wasn't the reason Winona had made the sound.

Winona held out her hand in front of her, into empty space, and muttered curiously, "I can't get through."

It sounded like nonsense. There was nothing visible where she was holding her hand.

At least, that was probably what it seemed like to her. Orphen, however, could see something there.

A sorcerous composition...? He couldn't understand it. You could say there were hardly any sorcerers on the continent who could weave compositions he couldn't comprehend, and you could also say there were plenty of them.

There were hardly any *humans* would be more accurate. But there was plenty of sorcery on the continent that had nothing to do with humanity. The sorcery of dragons.

A harsh buzzing sound, like large flying insects, shook his eardrums. The sorcerous composition was drawn on the air as if overlapping with that sound. Only sorcerers could see these, and this one was extremely complex, precise, and immense. It was undoubtedly dragon sorcery, and the effect of that sorcery was preventing anyone from intruding upon that space. And in the center of the space... was Lottecia.

In Lottecia's right hand was a sword—a long, straight blade drawn from its sheath. It was the magic sword that her father had cherished. A sorcerous relic said to be created by the Weird Dragons. No one knew the secret to activating that sword, yet active it currently was.

Winona had likely caught on to what was happening. She glanced at Orphen without saying a thing. Orphen reached out as well, touching the space that had pushed her back with his fingers. He felt a springy wall of air and a slight shock like static electricity. If he pushed against it with his hand, his hand was met with equal force.

Orphen silently drew his shortsword from its sheath. He prodded at the invisible wall with it. The same thing happened with the sword that had happened with his fingers.

Putting the blade away, he muttered, "The Red Dragon used it once. That sword."

"Can you break through?" Winona asked him. "The girl doesn't seem to be home at the moment."

Orphen shook his head. "If the Celestials made this with the intent to defend its user, then I don't think I can get through it unless I really try to kill whoever's inside."

It wasn't as if he had no trump cards to use for situations like this, but just as he'd said, he had nothing that could guarantee the safety of the target if he used it.

All of a sudden, the buzzing sound filling the air around them stopped. Like spilling sand, the flow of the sound concentrated on Lottecia... and the composition faded. And like a puppet whose strings had been cut, the girl inside the barrier fell to the ground.

"Lottecia?" Orphen ran to her, but she seemed fine. Before he got to her, she was already picking herself up off of the sandy ground, a blank look on her face. She probably hadn't been unconscious in the first place. She shook her head as if to shake something off of her and then turned to him.

"Orphen...? I..." She groaned.

"What happened?" Orphen asked her.

"Umm... Leki was..." That was as far as she got before she closed her mouth like it was the end of the thought. She noticed Winona and exclaimed, "Ah...!"

There was fear on her face... That was what it looked like, at least. Whatever she felt, she backed up in her seated position, holding the sword tight to her. The sword had, at some point, returned to its sheath. At that point, she must have realized that there was no reason for her to be afraid. She blinked her eyes and shook her head once more.

"Umm... I'm sorry. I'm confused..."

"What about Leki?" Orphen asked, crouching down next to her. As far as he could tell, she did appear to be in a state of confusion. Judging from the crater right next to her, something had obviously happened very suddenly.

Lottecia took several breaths, slowly regaining her calm. She glanced up at Winona, who was just standing there, and said, "He was here. Leki was..."

"Here?" Orphen asked dubiously, giving Winona a look.

The Dragoon just folded her arms and raised her eyebrows. "Well, that's strange. I should have brought him along to my lord."

"If Leki was here, was Claiomh with him?" Orphen asked, turning back to

Lottecia.

Still holding the sword to her, she shook her head. “No. She wasn’t. I think what happened was... when I got close to him, everything went white all of a sudden...” She glanced at the nearby crater, her voice trembling, and... “I figured it out!” Lottecia suddenly shouted.

Orphen took a step back in surprise, but Lottecia grabbed his arm as if to keep him in place.

She shouted, unconcerned about the spittle flying from her lips, “I figured it out—how to use the sword! It protected me!”

“Whoa—ack—Okay, just calm down. Calm down!” Orphen pushed her back and pointed at the sword. “It’s not that unusual that the sword protected you. Most Celestial sorcery automatically defends its user.”

“That’s not it. I really figured it out! The sword came out of the sheath on its own and I heard a voice—” She pressed forward the same distance Orphen had pushed her, her strength the same as that of the invisible wall, and raised her voice even more.

Still, Orphen kept trying to pull back as he responded, “A voice...?”

“Yes! My father’s voice... and...” Her charge stopped there. She pulled back the same amount Orphen had retreated, so distance suddenly opened up between them.

Lottecia’s voice had quieted, so it was incredibly difficult to pick up over this new distance.

“And... Ed...”

“Hmm?” It was Winona who asked for clarification. But Lottecia was completely ignoring her, slowly muttering to herself instead.

“He said not to let go of the sword.” She looked up. “And he said... to rely on someone.”

“Someone? On who?” Orphen asked, and she answered with little confidence.

“It was a name I felt like I’d heard before somewhere... A long and kind of

unpleasant name. Like someone feigning nobility, but also somehow poor sounding...”

“Like what?”

“I think it was Krylancelo.”

“Yeah, don’t rely on him,” Orphen told her with narrowed eyes.

Winona piped up behind him, her voice traveling over his head. “It was probably just your ears playing tricks on you. I hear all the time about strange voices whispering to people when they’re in danger.”

Lottecia went quiet when Winona put a damper on her enthusiasm.

Watching her, Orphen thought to himself, *Her ears playing tricks on her? Is that all it was?* Lottecia had said “Krylancelo.” She had said the name clearly, so he was sure of it. *How else would she know that name?*

He didn’t remember ever telling it to her, but Leticia or Irgitte could have called him that in front of her. Claiomh may have told her on a whim too. Lottecia didn’t seem to have put together that the name referred to him, but it was possible that she remembered somewhere deep inside.

“I know I heard it...” Lottecia muttered to herself stubbornly.

Orphen lent her a hand and they stood up. He kept his eyes on her sword as they did. Her enthusiasm had caused them to stray from the subject, but the sword wasn’t the only mystery right now.

Leki was here? Away from Claiomh?

Even if he tried not to think about the reason for that... what it meant was one fewer thing guaranteeing her safety.

He felt a chill run through him somewhere between his muscles and his skin as he thought about that. Was this also cheating of some kind? Or was it just an accident? Either way, he now had an even thinner margin for error than he had before.

Glancing at the crater, Orphen said quietly, “I don’t think Leki attacked Lottecia,” without sparing Winona a glance. “This is probably the aftermath of teleportation. Do you remember which way he was facing?” he asked Lottecia.

She searched her memories for a moment, waving her hands this way and that, before pointing in one direction. “At the end, he was looking at me, so... that way, I think.”

He looked in that direction. All he saw was the horizon at the end of the wastes. There was a dark shadow there between the ground and the sky. Even if Deep Dragons used sight as a medium for their sorcery, it wasn’t likely that Leki had teleported all the way to the horizon. Still, he didn’t seem to be anywhere within visual range either. That shadow far in the distance... The sun was starting to set and the darkness of the sky was beginning to melt into that shadow.

“What’s...?” Before Orphen could even finish, Winona answered him.

“Just as you suspect, it’s Fenrir’s Forest. This is the far west of the Imminent Domain. The spot closest to the dragons’ sanctuary... Of course, it’ll take about three days to walk all the way to the forest from here.”



“I found one! It’s an assassin!”

When she heard that, she felt joy—though she also had enough sense left to realize that she shouldn’t. *She* might be the assassin the voice was yelling about. At the very least, they probably had no way of distinguishing between her, Seek, and Kakorkist.

But when she heard the shout repeated and heard it growing more distant rather than closer to her, Irgitte Sweetheart felt relieved that her joy had been the right reaction. That meant that the pursuers were after Seek and Kakorkist and that they were just nearby.

She was startled when it was still dark even after she opened her eyes. It took her a few moments, a few seconds perhaps, to realize that it was dark because night was approaching. Why had she been sleeping here? Since she was in the bushes, there were scratches all over her body. In the bushes...?

She had no memory of why she was here. That in itself wasn’t unusual. But usually when she lost her memories, she was left with enough to deduce what had been happening up to that point. Empty bottles, a suit dirtied with vomit

(one she'd bought for social get-togethers), several friends of hers all snoring in a big heap in one of their rooms or a disgruntled barkeep thrusting a detailed receipt in her face in a deserted tavern.

But there was none of that here. There was no sense of crushing discomfort like her brain had swelled larger than the capacity of her skull, or pain like she had nails hammered into her. There was nothing. She'd just lost all her memories since noon that day.

She heard footsteps. She was still lying down, her ear pressed to the earth. Several people were running about, yelling to each other about finding assassins.

I have to get up! It was an impulse. It was sheer instinct. She had no time to think. She couldn't just stay here on the ground.

She tried to get up and got stuck in the branches just above her head. She clicked her tongue in annoyance as the bushes constricted her like a net. It was strange—whatever the circumstances that had led to her being here, if she'd fallen into these bushes, they should have been under her. Yet the ground was the only thing beneath her. It was like she'd sprouted from the ground or appeared here from thin air. Or like someone had hidden her here...

The bushes smothering her were thick, dense, and heavy. She forced them aside with her arms. There was no time to worry about the noise she was making either. Cursing to herself with whatever occurred to her in the moment, she turned herself over. She sighed, finally feeling like she could breathe.

From a height she couldn't reach, a dark shadow was looking down at her.

She stopped herself just before she was about to scream. She told herself that the shadow wasn't a person to maintain her composure.

She was looking up at a roof. There was a large mansion before her. It was the bushes of a flowerbed she was lying in.

Knowing that brought her some peace of mind. She crawled out of the flowerbed and stood up, patting her clothes to brush the dirt off, but since she'd been facedown in damp earth, she didn't think much was being accomplished. Fed up with the damp sensation that permeated her clothes all

the way through her underwear, she questioned herself. She was supposed to be in a wasteland. A field of dirt and sand with no moisture of any kind.

She looked around and found something like a garden surrounding the mansion. This sort of garden couldn't be kept up without quite a bit of labor, perseverance, and money—if it was even possible to do so in a wasteland. Though the Celestials supposedly wielded great sorcery that rewrote the very terrain and climate of an area...

The commotion was growing farther away. The garden filled with greenery was dimming as the sun set. It was a convenient situation for stealth. She would locate Seek and Kakorkist before their pursuers and persuade them to surrender. That was the only way. If they hadn't done any harm to anyone yet, they probably wouldn't be executed on the spot. And if they were about to be, then she'd just have to persuade the other people too.

Assassination is... just stupid. She felt her heart rate increasing. *Violence is stupid. This isn't the chaos of ancient times and we're not outlaws!*

She pinpointed the direction her pursuers were headed and turned. Then she took off, trying to hurry in that direction without making too much noise. She knew there was a scraping sound every time her shoes met the ground, though.

I can't do it like Krylancelo. He always made it look like he was just walking normally, but when he wanted to, he made no sound at all.

She'd asked him countless times how he did it... in the past. He'd lifted his robe simply like he was showing off the steps of a dance and showed her his feet.

Just don't put too much strength into it when you walk, he'd said. If you use too much, you'll make sound, and if you use too little, you'll fall. You have to do it just right. It makes you less tired, though. The people who sneak around all tense actually make more sound, you know...

She was the type to sneak around tensely, she was sure of it. She kept moving, smiling wryly to herself.

And after a few steps, her footsteps quieted.

She stopped, feeling a strange sensation—the reason her foot hadn't made

any sound was because she'd stepped on something soft. She looked down. Her toes had sunk into a mass of something dark.

It was the hair of a man lying spread-eagle on the ground as if to block one of the paths through the garden. That was what she was stepping on. The tip of her shoe was digging into the hair enough to rip it from the man's head, but he showed no signs of being in pain. His body was facing upward, but his head was facedown.

She fell backward. No matter how she struggled, she couldn't remove her shoe from the man's hair. As if it were some kind of curse... Of course, she knew that it was actually just because her legs were frozen.

But... this is... This is...! she cried to herself.

There was no need to check whether the man was dead or not. It wasn't just his neck that was broken. Now that she got a better look at him, his whole body was warped in some way. His stomach was distended unnaturally, probably because his internal organs had shifted in position. He'd been exposed to an overwhelming power and his life had been thoroughly extinguished.

The killing had already begun.

Is it all over? I was too late... She began to groan in despair. She shrunk when she heard a scream.

Everything went dark.

"SEEEEEK!" She heard her own voice exploding out of her. She stood, her vocal chords trembling, and ran off toward the commotion without worrying about her footsteps anymore.

"Kakorkist! You idiots! You traitors—" she shrieked, hysterical.

It was all over. Now that she was sure of that, all she could do was scream.

They were assassins. They killed people as casually as someone tossed out the garbage.

She ran on, striding over several corpses. They must have been servants or bodyguards who worked here at the mansion. The armed men and women lay scattered on the ground, their bodies broken. This wasn't murder, it was

destruction. The bodies had been crushed and warped with a power that bordered on excessive.

This wasn't the work of a human being. Only one who surpassed humanity could do something like this.

This was the domain of superhuman sorcerers.

But this isn't the way sorcery is meant to be used! She sniffled—she'd been sobbing without realizing it.

"I'll kill you! You can't make excuses for yourselves anymore—"

The ground shook, and it wasn't just her own dizziness. There was a loud sound and everything around her actually shook. At the same time, a human body flew at her from a thicket she was running past.

The body was like a rag; its frame was completely broken. Irgitte punched the ragdoll corpse away from her and glared at the thicket.



“So that’s where you are!” Rage and resentment spilled from her lips. “Show yourself! Seek? Or is it Kakorkist?”

There was no answer. All she was met with was the forest, darkened by the shadows of night.

Irgitte thrust her hands out and put her guard up. Weaving the most powerful composition she was able to, she went on, “So you’ve lost not only your pride as a court sorcerer but your common sense as a human being too—or did you never have any in the first place? I’ll end it for you. If you have any regret, then at least die with some dignity.”

Time passed and there was no response. In that time, she completed her composition. She felt bliss when the blueprint of powerful destruction was complete. The bliss of power. Any sorcerer felt it. They were blessed with supreme power and it was their duty to control that power. They could not escape that fate.

“You two took the wrong path somewhere along the way. And don’t tell me it was someone’s order. Sorcerers have sworn to govern themselves.” She raised her voice, surrounded by a composition that was a second from exploding on its own. The garden was still quiet. “Do you think I can’t do it?! Sure, I feel some disgust murdering people with sorcery, unlike you two, but—”

...With sorcery? She realized then.

If they had been using sorcery, why had she not heard their spells? Why hadn’t she seen a single fragment of a composition?

If it wasn’t sorcery...

Was that even possible?

Irgitte hurriedly turned around. The pitiful corpse she’d shoved aside earlier was lying there. It had died in a creepy doll-like pose, smashed at regular intervals from the torso to all four limbs. Since its jaw was broken, its face was distorted so much it was hard to tell at a glance that it was even human.

It couldn’t... not be sorcery. No human could do this.

Her panic won out over her finely constructed composition, which faded

away. She couldn't maintain the strength slipping away from her grasp. And...

Something flew out at her from the thicket.

It wasn't a corpse. It was a sharper, stronger, faster shadow.

It flew at her in an instant, almost curled up into a ball.

She was able to counterattack swiftly thanks to her regular combat training—she thrust her left fist out, the side that was closer to her attacker. It was sucked into the dark shadow and she felt her blow connect.

I win—

She quickly realized her mistake.

She thought she'd hit her enemy with her fist, but her enemy had actually just caught her hand. She was stuck in its grip, unable to pull her hand back. And from where it had her in its grasp, she felt a sudden intense, pounding impact.

Her vision rotated. Not sideways or vertically but irregularly. In other words, she'd been thrown.

Gravity ceased to exist and she slammed into the trunk of a tree. It was her good fortune that she didn't break her back. She was struck, she was thrown, she fell, and she hit the ground. She raised her head, clenching her teeth so hard she thought the roots of her teeth might dig deeper into her jaw. She knew she had to defend against a follow-up attack... but found that she couldn't.

In the first place, there was no enemy before her to speak of. There wasn't even a trace of a person in front of her. She was just lying on the ground all by herself.

"Ahaha." A dry laugh slipped from her mouth. She couldn't move.

Visible on the ground before her was her left arm, torn from her body. She looked down at it as tears welled up in her eyes. She realized because of those tears that she was experiencing such intense pain that her brain simply couldn't process it, and Irgitte screamed.

Chapter V: Fifth Instance of Death

It was a meaningless gate.

It was *only* a gate—it wasn't as if a fence surrounded the garden, and the gate only served to emphasize the artificial nature of the garden in the middle of the wasteland. If there was no fence or wall, then there was no reason to build a gate. Yet there the gate was. An iron door between two pillars. A serpent pattern framed the completely level, rust-free door.

No, it wasn't meaningless. Leticia changed her mind with a wry smile. This gate was ironic. A sort of sarcasm directed at the gods. A sarcasm for the state of the world. This garden was the Serpent's Garden. But there was nothing around it. It was a serpent gate meant only to express what lay beyond.

Just for irony like that... Guess they've got plenty of time on their hands, she thought to herself as she removed the pin that acted as the safety from the repeating bowgun. There was no point musing about the motivations of such whimsical people.

Beyond this garden was the lord.

I've snuck in this far. Will you just leave me be, Damian Rue? she asked herself. If they weren't worried about her yet, then she just had to keep going until they could no longer ignore her.

The quiet was uncomfortable. She could see a mansion beyond the garden, but the sun had set, so it was just a dark shadow against the night sky. There were no lights in the windows. She'd been picturing dozens of guards, but the garden was so quiet it seemed deserted.

Or maybe...

She held up the bowgun and narrowed her eyes, looking around.

Maybe it really is deserted... There was a possibility Seek and that other young sorcerer, whatever his name was, had already arrived and the fighting had begun. Of course, if that was the case, then Damian had probably already

defeated them. It was their own fault, really. To tell the truth, she wasn't so relaxed at the moment that she could spare any worry for a pair of assassins she didn't know very well.

Leticia cautiously stepped foot into the garden.

Damian Rue had predicted that he'd kill her using "violence that already exists"—that probably meant that he wouldn't lift a finger directly. Not until he was truly backed into a corner. Meaning a situation where all or most of his subordinates were wiped out.

She didn't know how many Dragoons the lord had in his employ, but she'd have to defeat all of them herself.

Doesn't seem like I'll be able to hold back. She glanced down at the bowgun in her hand. It was a weapon that rapidly fired four bolts roughly the size of darts, but it wasn't all that lethal. It was perfect for intimidation and making a show of force, but on the other hand, that was really all it was good for.

She wouldn't make it through without her sorcery—she admitted that fact grimly. People might die. She'd become a murderer.

You couldn't murder for a just cause. The only people who thought that were terrorists. She wasn't like that... She wanted to think so, at least. Leticia groaned. If she disavowed self-righteous "just causes," then were there other things that justified taking people's lives?

There are. I'm here for just that sort of reason, she told herself. No... *There aren't. But I had no choice but to come here.*

Every few seconds, she changed her mind. Her thoughts were going in circles.

Nausea kept welling up in her throat. She couldn't stop it. Murder. And a sorcerer using their overwhelming power to kill someone without that same power was the worst kind of crime. Overpowering someone who wasn't able to put up a fight...

What was strength?

What did it mean to call someone strong?

Was it being able to overpower someone enough to ignore their existence?

Was it obtaining freedom through the oppression of others?

You had to do those things to express your strength. But actually carrying through to the end of that thinking, crushing and dominating everyone around you couldn't possibly be strength.

What was strength? What did it mean to be strong? If other people calling you strong was all it took to prove your strength, then there were any number of people who could claim the title of the "strongest"... herself included.

Leticia held herself with one arm. The sound of her breathing grew louder. She had to be quieter, she told herself.

She decided to forbid herself from thinking as well.

She needed to concentrate now. She couldn't be thinking about these things.

She pushed her thoughts aside and concentrated on simple alertness. Leticia moved her eyes and her bowgun at the same speed. The garden was dark. It was a soundless stage, completely free of any trace of people.

Only the sound of the wind echoed around her. It was like a giant instrument with the starry sky behind it. But it began to fade when she entered the garden. It was high pitched, like the sound of a cloth scraping against the floor. The unpleasant sound almost made her shiver, but she ignored it, focusing on being cautious.

She sensed no presences. She just slowly, deliberately proceeded through the quiet garden as if getting a taste of it.

That was when she found the first corpse.

It was lying in her path, limbs splayed out. There was no need to check for signs of life. The body was armed. It must have been someone who worked for the lord. She doubted there'd been any pain in its final moments—its head was missing. It was holding a sword, and if there was a world after death, she thought it was most likely still facing off against the enemy that had killed it there, unable to accept its own demise.

There's no world after death. Her own calm voice admonished her for her delusions.

There was no such thing as that. This soldier had just been changed from a human being into an object, and seeking some sort of greater meaning in that was just superstition that the animals called humans learned as they lived. Just as there's little actual difference between a thrown stone and a fallen stone, there was little difference in this soldier before his death and now. There was little difference between her and the corpse she was looking down on either.

But that was just another sickening delusion...

The fighting occurred quite a while ago, looks like, she thought, trying to get a hold on reality instead of her distracting musings. She couldn't bring herself to approach the corpse, but even from this distance and in the dark of night, she could tell that the victim's blood had coagulated and turned a dark, nausea-inducing color.

He was killed without hesitation. This wasn't an accident or anything like that. It was the work of a true assassin. I can't relax just because I can't sense anyone nearby...

That court sorcerer with the shaved head—no, she should say the Stabber working for the court sorcerers. Recalling the face of Seek Marrisk, she sighed. If he was still alive and she ran into him, was he someone she could ignore? At present, she wasn't opposing those two assassins. In fact, there was a chance they could work together. Their goal was assassinating the lord. Her goal differed from theirs slightly, but there were plenty of similarities between them.

No.

She disagreed with herself. She couldn't let the lord be killed. He still had a role to play. It was another man who had to be forced to leave the stage.

And... she added one more thought.

Irgitte's face was the one that came to her mind now. That pitiful girl, with a miserable expression on her face after receiving a shock. Leticia groaned to herself, mildly furious with Maria Huwon for forcing her into such a cruel role, though it was likely that Miss Maria didn't have a choice either.

There's no guarantee Irgitte wouldn't be killed if she tried to stop Seek—no, she would be. I can't protect anyone. But if she managed to subdue those

assassins before that, Irgitte might be able to go home alive.

A figure leaped down from above, knocking the bowgun from her hand with its momentum. At the same time, it thrust out both its fists at her chest in a strange stance.

Left with no other options, she backed up, stopping when she hit a tree. Finally registering that she'd been attacked, she tried to ascertain her enemy's position when a sword emerged from behind her, stopping her in her tracks. The blade of the saber pressed against her throat.



That young assassin, whatever his name was, was staring at her from right in front of her in a low stance with both his arms hanging down, just like a monkey who'd dropped down from a tree. It didn't take her long to guess who was behind her, holding the blade to her throat, then. She listened quietly as Seek's calm voice entered her ear.

"Now then... Leticia MacCready." Even if she couldn't see the assassin's face, the blade at her neck was a clear enough representation of him. "There are plenty of things I'd like to ask you, but let me just say this first. You will not be able to kill us."



The sound of the wind stole away her hearing.

A raucous torrent of air wrenched into her eardrums.

She couldn't hear anything. All she could hear was the voice coming from inside her ears—her own voice.

This went against her ideals.

This was all wrong.

Something that could not possibly happen was happening.

There was something she needed to do in order to correct this mistake.

Inside the wind.

She wandered through the dark.

She listened only to her own voice. It spoke to her serenely of beautiful ideals.



"First question. Are you our enemy?"

The assassin's question hinted at the man's presence in the deep darkness. The two men stared her down from the front and behind. Sword and question alike had been thrust at her. Put all of it together and it led to one conclusion.

It wasn't the question itself that made Leticia hesitate—though maybe it wasn't something she should answer right away either. She carefully sucked in a

breath. The sound of that breath might have been her death knell.

No...

That's not right.

She felt her chilled blood filling her heart before it could beat out of her chest. This wasn't her death. Irony and certainty came to mind at the same time. The illusion Damian Rue had shown her of her death hadn't been like this. She wouldn't die here.

"If you two are *my* enemy."

She thought on her own words after they left her mouth. The assassins didn't seem to find her answer strange. It was a hackneyed response, to be sure.

And the hackneyed exchange went on from there.

"Question two, then. Are we your enemy?"

"Well, that depends on your roles."

"You must have an idea of that."

Seek Marrisk's voice entered her ear and his sharp blade moved a few millimeters toward her carotid artery. As she felt goosebumps forming on her skin from the dangerous contact, she estimated how much room the blade would give her to move. In short, a few millimeters. If she moved more than that, Seek would kill her.

As for the other, younger assassin in front of her, he was watching her with both arms hanging by his sides, completely undefended. His gaze was disinterested, neither smirking at her nor trying to intimidate her. But he was firmly outside of her reach. And he was also staying close enough that he could grab her in an instant if she managed to shake Seek off of her. Naturally, his eyes stayed fixed on her the entire time.

Leticia slowly filled her throat with air.

"Is your mission to assassinate the lord of the Imminent Domain? I guess it's not out of fashion to play war in the east yet."

"This isn't as abnormal a situation as you think it is. You're free to think

whatever you like, of course.”

The assassin behind her wasn't as perturbed by her words as she was hoping and just answered her like what he was saying was completely natural.

“So, Leticia MacCready. Dodging the question is an arrogant thing to do. And throwing your life away is rather careless, wouldn't you say?”

“This coming from you?” She felt her stomach twisting from the irony.

She felt like she could feel Seek smile faintly through the sword touching her. No, maybe he was smiling wryly as he adjusted his grip on the hilt.

“I do have my own sense of ethics that I follow.”

“I'll answer your question, then. If you can convince me with those so-called ethics of yours, then I won't bother taking you two down.”

“You think you can defeat us in this situation?”

Leticia answered the question with two conflicting responses in her mind. It was impossible. It was possible. Both were true, and both were lies. She couldn't think of any way to get out of this predicament. Still, there *was* a way.

She didn't want to do it now, though.

Not until I go up against Damian...

She didn't want to tip her hand. She was sure that the white sorcerer was still observing her right now.

“At times like these,” Leticia said with a smile, “someone tends to jump in and help, right?”

“We're the only living humans in this garden,” Seek stated bluntly. “If you start to compose a spell, I'll just open up a hole in your neck with my sword. Do you understand? There's no escape for you. But we don't have much time for this. If you're going to continue to be uncooperative, we'll kill you even if you are on our side.”

“So you want me to work with you?”

“Just not working against us is fine. Don't oppose us. We don't want to fight you and create unnecessary victims either. I don't know what your goal is, but if

you can achieve it without interfering with us, then just let things play out how they will.”

While they spoke... *I'll get my arm in under the blade...* Leticia got a firm grip on the actions she should take. *From this position, he won't be able to take my arm off with his sword. While I'm stopping his sword with my arm, I'll compose the largest spell I can to take out the enemy in front of me. After that, I'll take Seek Marrisk down in close combat.*

There were several problems with her plan. Even if it went well, she'd be sacrificing an arm to pull it off. She didn't know if she could take one of the assassins down with sorcery. And her chances of survival were low if Seek attacked her from behind while she was doing so.

But this was the only idea she had.

Krylancelo's probably the only one who would fight in such a stupid way... But her brother would make this plan succeed. No matter the damage he took, he would defeat the assassin in front of him.

She had no idea if she could do it, but she had no choice but to take the gamble. It irritated her to work up her resolve based on Damian's prediction, but...

She stuck her arm in between the blade and her neck. At the same time, she concentrated, weaving a sorcerous composition. Compounding destruction. Even if the target used something to defend themselves, this spell was powerful enough to go straight through the obstacle and destroy the target. There was no way to block it.

An instant later...

“SEEEEEK!”

There was a scream.

It echoed out as if to mask her composition. And that wasn't just metaphorical. With the scream, a huge composition manifested, wiping Leticia's spell out before it could fully form. Abandoning her spell, Leticia focused on the new composition. It didn't belong to the assassins. The scream wasn't theirs either.

It was a simple spell. A clear and precise one as well. There was no crafty logic in it, nor roundabout setup. It was a powerful outburst of energy to eliminate the assassins—and herself—and wipe them completely off the map.

A pure white light expanded out. No, this was nothing so transient as light. This was a powerful blow that dyed space itself that color.

Praying that she would make it in time, she shouted, clinging to a new composition she drew up after abandoning her compounding destruction spell. “Other world!”

All her senses cut out.

She lost her connection to reality, withdrawing from mass, direction, and all coordinates. To put it simply, she vanished from this world. It was the ultimate defense that allowed her to escape any sort of physical influence, but she couldn’t maintain it for long.

She returned to the world, likely after a few seconds. Leticia opened her eyes, doing her best to resist the urge to black out as her senses returned to her. She hadn’t moved a step from the spot where she’d disappeared—she’d erased her very existence, so there was no way she could have moved—but everything around her had changed. The ground around her was cratered and flaming. The assassins were gone. Either they’d been blown away by that explosion or they’d defended themselves and fled somehow.

The garden was on fire. It was likely only a section of the whole, but standing in the center of it, it brought to mind the disastrous days of Muspelheim. In the blaze, Leticia shouted, panting from lack of oxygen.

“Irgitte?!”

She was the one who appeared in the flames—stepping through the sorcerous fire she herself had created. Leticia didn’t know what had happened, but her clothes were covered in blood. The injury on her left shoulder looked the worst. She was bleeding enough for her life to be in clear danger, yet Irgitte was still walking toward her. She held her left shoulder with her right hand, her left arm dangling limp at her side.

Her hair clung to her, caked with mud and blood. And the face underneath

that hair was smiling. Her lips alone were curled into a wild smile.

She was in shock from the pain.

No...

She's lost her mind... Leticia thought, seeing the peaceful smile on her bloodstained face.

She was still composed enough to be cautious. All of her nerves were screaming to her of danger. Her legs were frozen in fear. That hateful, dreary voice of the white sorcerer revived in her mind.

You have to save the whole lot of them all by yourself. The future that awaits you for that reason...

She's going to die. She's already dead, she whispered to herself as if to harden her resolve. *Damian Rue's attack has already begun. If I don't resist it, he'll trick me!*

There was no way for her to save Irgitte. If she tried, she would likely die too.

She could hardly believe she was even thinking that. No, maybe the thought *hadn't* actually come from her. It was possible, since she'd paid the price in order to fight against Damian Rue. In exchange for Damian being unable to control her body, she couldn't say she was fully in control of it either. And the other ruler of that body was crying out. Don't hesitate. Fight.

Fight... Fight. Fighting? Is this fighting?

What fighting meant was killing her already dying friend.

She was about to act on thoughts that were unbelievably cruel to her. She had no time to think. She was inside a burning forest. The sorcerous flames would likely fade in the next minute or so, but that wouldn't put out the trees that were already burning. In any case, she couldn't stand around in the middle of this oxygen-deficient environment for another half a day, or even a minute.

As her vision wavered in the smoke, she set her eyes on Irgitte, who was trying to find her.

Irgitte was smiling. How much longer would she be able to remain alive? She didn't know, but it seemed to her that she was using what little time she had

left to obtain a traveling companion for herself in her final moments. Maybe that was crazy.

The composition that came to mind was equally as simple as the one she'd just received. It was also equally as powerful. The half-mad Irgitte wouldn't be able to defend against it. She would have to finish her off.

She sucked in a breath. The air was bitter with smoke. Her tongue spasmed. It felt like that bitter taste was sliding all the way down her throat.

"Light!"

She finished her spell. Irgitte's smiling face froze in shock...

The spell didn't activate. The composition faded and the magical power that had failed to materialize rocked her, sending her to her knees. Spitting out the mud that had gotten in her mouth when she fell, Leticia lifted her head. She wiped the sweat from her brow with her palm. Amid the flames, she shouted out with the pain from the fire burning her skin and another, different sort of pain too.

"Irgitte!" She grabbed scorched mud in one hand, which was still pressed against the ground. It burned. "Are you alive?! Are you sane?! Answer me!"

"Leticia..." Irgitte called her name, no longer letting out that shrieking laughter. Still holding her left shoulder, she slowly turned her head toward Leticia and yelled, "Watch out... They're still alive!"

They? Which "they" did she mean?

It took her a few seconds to puzzle that out.

And while she was hesitating, reality intruded relentlessly. She gasped at the uncomfortable sensation.

"Resound." A solemn voice made some sort of command.

The order compelled reality. A spell released from a sorcerous composition. She should have had enough time to counterattack, and yet...

Leticia just looked up at the composition, unmoving. She was choking on the smoke and couldn't speak. All she could do was get a good look at the composition of the spell and understand it. Power was collecting around it,

focused on the heavily wounded Irgitte.

The explosion tore Irgitte to shreds. She went flying to the side and then up into the air after she hit the ground. If the situation hadn't been what it was, it might have been a comical sight. Her left arm, which had remained attached to her by a thread, came away from her and flew in a different direction.

Had she been insane? Had she been of sound mind? Irgitte's body fell to the ground and stopped moving before Leticia could even determine that.

That seemed more unfair than anything else—that she hadn't been able to figure that out.

Shouldn't I have been able to tell...?

Looking her in the face and conversing with her should have been enough. She couldn't imagine it would take more than that to determine whether a friend of hers was sane or not. Yet she hadn't been sure.

Leticia raised her head. She stood while the flames had been blown away from her from the blast.

Just then, the assassin, Seek Marrisk, showed himself amid some trees. He was walking toward her with his broken sword—it had likely snapped while he was escaping from that first explosion—thrust out in his hand.

Leticia clenched her fist as she started to run. She ran straight to the assassin and sent a kick at him. The man fended off her kick with his right arm and the sword fell from the assassin's hand. There was no surprise on his face.

Seek was calm even as she kept kicking him, as if he half-expected her to take him down. Before he could counterattack, Leticia thrust the tip of her boots into his right thigh and stomach. She finished with a kick to his chest when he bent over from the other blows.

Stomping her foot down on Seek's face when he fell to the ground, Leticia ran off into the garden without looking back at him. She picked up the repeating bowgun, which had been thrown all this way by the first explosion, and weaved between the trees, picking up speed.

She never yelled, but she didn't intend to remain calm either.

Leticia ran, mad with fury, toward the lord’s mansion behind the garden.

Damian Rue... She felt her trembling breaths leave her as curses. *Come out here. Show yourself to me!* Even as the thought raged in her mind, she knew it would never happen.

She’d seen through the white sorcerer’s tricks.

He’d taken them by surprise and separated her from Krylancelo, and now he was observing as she and the assassins tried to kill each other where Krylancelo couldn’t see them. Then he’d finish off whichever side won and erase all traces of his presence, and it would all be over.

Considering the fact that they wanted to get rid of Leticia but wanted Krylancelo’s help in the end, it was a good strategy—since they could blame Leticia’s death on the assassins, Krylancelo wouldn’t hold it against them. He might harbor some doubts, but he’d be forced to accept it in the end. They still had Claiomh and Majic as hostages, after all.

This plan posed no risks for her enemies.

Aside from the fact that it could potentially lead to the lord actually being assassinated.

There’s one more too, she realized. Of the assassins, Irgitte, and herself, if she was the one who survived, then Damian would naturally have to confront her personally.

Put another way, that meant that unless she won out against every single one of Damian’s pawns, she’d never be able to face the white sorcerer himself.

Seek said every one of the lord’s soldiers in this garden had been wiped out. If that was true, then the only person left for her to face was the other assassin—that young man with the long name. His partner had been taken out, but there was no sign of him in the area. He must have been headed for the lord’s mansion. Following after him, Leticia picked up the pace.



“Leticia MacCready. As I thought, you can’t kill us,” Seek muttered, sitting up. He continued grumbling as he pressed his hands to himself, checking the

severity of his wounds. “Not if you’re leaving without confirming the death of your opponents.”

He glanced around for his dropped saber out of nothing more than sentimentality—even if he found it, the sword had been shattered, so there would have been no point in taking it with him. When his gaze hit upon a blade pointed his way, he stopped moving.

He didn’t think of it as a miracle. After all, he hadn’t confirmed her death either. This was how it went with matters of life and death—it was like fumbling around to find a stone at the bottom of a deep lake. You couldn’t be sure until you confirmed it with your own eyes. And even if you thought you had confirmed it, sometimes, you could still be surprised. So he wasn’t shocked when he saw Irgitte standing there unsteadily after losing an arm and taking a sorcerous attack straight on. She was holding his saber and heading toward him, though from her progress, it didn’t seem like she’d reach him even if she was given ten years. Of course, she could prove him wrong about that too.

Seek opened his mouth. “Instructor Maria Huwon told me that she would kill me if you didn’t come back alive.” He took a breath. “So, if possible, I did want at least you to return alive. It’s true.”

It was quiet. The flames burning the forest had faded, and his student, who would always go on about something pointless at times like this, wasn’t here either.

“Now... I should get going too. Either Kakorkist or I will fulfill our goal. It’s not as if there are two Leticia MacCreadys, after all.”

He turned around and headed off for the depths of the garden. He couldn’t bring himself to confirm the death of Irgitte, who was still slowly following after him.



“Light!”

A white light pierced the sky.

It hit against the barrier warping space and exploded. Was that the shaking she felt, or was it her own body trembling? Leticia felt a chill, unable to

ascertain the answer.

The heat wave easily blew away the trees around her, opening up her field of view. The light and flames set the night sky ablaze.

It wasn't something she could easily believe, yet it also wasn't something that particularly surprised her. She etched that truth into her heart.

He's a caster on the same level as me!

Sorcerers were humans who could utilize magic power. There were all sorts of different casters who were better at different things. The power of their spells differed and they had different quirks as well.

There were hardly any other casters at the Tower who measured up to her when it came to overall power. Aside from the monstrous teachers, it was really only her sister Azalie and Colgon among her class.

In a straight shoot-out, she would never lose in firepower. She was confident in that. Even if she were up against Master Childman Powderfield, Maria Huwon, or Pluto the Demon of the capital.

Repelling her full-power sorcery from head on, the assassin fled from the light of the flames into the shadows of the trees and then disappeared into deeper darkness her eyes couldn't penetrate.

That just means they exist in the east... sorcerers like this. She chased after the young assassin. She couldn't recall the man's name no matter how she tried, but she decided to at least commit his face to memory.

Still holding her bowgun in her right hand, she raised her left arm and shouted out once more toward the trees where the assassin had disappeared, "Light!"

The wave of light and heat rushed toward its target and rampaged about to destroy everything in its path. It was hot enough to easily turn the components of the human body to ash. It brought certain death with it. But Leticia was also sure that it wouldn't strike true.

"Shoot!"

She heard a loud spell in return. A whirl of light swelled up at the same time, crashing into her own spell with a noisy blast.

The two spells canceled each other out, leaving only flames behind.

She thrust out her bowgun at the rush of air from the blast.

The flames and heat should have illuminated the darkness some, but she still couldn't see the assassin within it. Was he ignoring her and moving on or was he setting a trap for her?

Sorcery that was too powerful also had flaws. The stronger a spell was, the more difficult it was to control. If they were equals in terms of raw power, then how they used their sorcery would decide the victor. She etched that thought into her heart. And clicked her tongue in annoyance. If she'd had Krylancelo's superlative control, she would have had no problem, but there was no point in lamenting something that she couldn't change.

Brute force wouldn't work on this opponent, but she didn't have the finesse to put any sort of spin on her spells.

I can't use my sorcery... Her only option was to get close and overpower him physically.

Right when she was about to start running, there was a voice, like it had been timed perfectly.

"Dance."

He deployed his composition swiftly. It overwhelmed the area and completely surrounded her.

Leticia took the time before it activated to steel herself, and to weave her own defensive composition.

"Wall!" she shouted.

She could tell explosions were dancing on the other side of the defensive wall she'd brought up by the sounds coming from the darkness beyond. The wall dissipated. At the same time, Leticia rushed forward. Holding the bowgun up, she lowered her stance and closed the distance between them.

She jumped into the grove of trees the assassin should have been hiding in, but he wasn't there. She could sense his presence, though.

On the right... It was just her instincts telling her that, but she trusted them.

When she turned, she heard his voice again.

“Crumble.”

“Wall!”

Two compositions manifested and dispersed, leaving behind nothing but the darkness and wind.

“Wha...?!” Leticia froze.

She hadn’t had time to analyze the enemy’s composition, so she’d countered with the spell she thought would be most effective, but her opponent must have seen through her. The assassin had cast a spell to cancel hers—not an attack, but a spell to erase her defense.

In that case, what would come next was...

His real attack! Leticia clenched her teeth, putting her guard up.

Composing a spell took concentration. It wasn’t as though she couldn’t fire them off in rapid succession, but they would lose reliability. She wasn’t confident she could do it without making a mistake.

But the same should have gone for her opponent.

From behind her shattered wall, she saw the assassin jump out, face blank. He closed the distance between them in an instant, aiming to engage her in close combat. That was just what she wanted—she responded by pulling the trigger of her bowgun.

The bowgun shook repeatedly, firing four bolts. They flew smoothly through the air toward their target. The assassin ran at full speed, twisting his body nimbly to dodge the projectiles. It was hard to believe he could move like that, but it hadn’t been outside of her expectations. Pulling the hook from the stock of the repeating bowgun, Leticia waited for her opponent to reach her. It didn’t take long. Maybe a half a second. But it felt much longer.

The assassin suddenly fell—it looked that way, at least. He rolled on the ground like he was doing a somersault and when he was in the position to do a handstand, he grabbed the ground and thrust his arms out. His legs stretched out, pointed at her face.

It was a surprise attack, but it wasn't hard to dodge if she could see it coming. Moving defensively, Leticia avoided the blow and swept her leg out at the assassin's arms, which were still on the ground.

A hand wrapped around her ankle.

This must have been his goal from the start. She looked down and the assassin was still on the ground, grabbing her right ankle. She had no idea when he'd taken it out, but there was a short knife in his left hand. There was no change in the man's expression. His face was still completely blank as he thrust the blade straight out at her calf.

She felt a faint pain, but her combat gear saved her. The assassin's blade slid across the black leather. She might have taken a shallow wound, but that was it. She pulled her leg back with all her might. She planned on sending her heel into her enemy's face next, but he spun around quickly again and ran off to a distance she could no longer reach. At around three paces from her, he swiftly stood up and faced her. And at the same time, or maybe even faster, he threw the knife in his hand. The glint of the blade grazed her nose as it went past her, just as she was thinking about going after him.

Staring her adversary down, Leticia snagged the hook of the bowgun on a nearby tree branch—the assassin gave her a quizzical look, but she was using the device in its intended manner. She put her weight on the bowgun and pulled with all her might. The bowstring attached to the hook pulled back, loading a new cartridge with a *snap*.

That must have clued him in to what kind of weapon it was. The assassin leaped back nimbly, gaining distance from Leticia in order to get out of her range. He was too slow, though. Leticia held the bowgun up, captured him in her sight, and pulled the trigger. Four bolts flew at the assassin, grazing him, with just one piercing him in the side. There was a small grunt of pain. The assassin carelessly pulled the bolt from him and tossed it to the ground.

Maybe he was getting desperate. He flew forward again. There were still cartridges left in the bowgun, but she definitely didn't have time to pull the string back again—Leticia threw the bowgun aside and adopted a fighting stance. She couldn't imagine she'd lose in hand-to-hand combat against a

wounded opponent. The assassin spread his arms and ran at her.

As her opponent swung at her with his fists, Leticia jumped back a step and sent a low kick at him. Her foot flew out toward his thigh. The tip of her boot hit the man's body. The assassin lost his balance and fell to the ground.

No, he only stumbled but didn't fall. Still, an opening was an opening. Keeping up her momentum, Leticia stepped in and raised her right leg. She lifted it up against her torso and swung her heel down toward her enemy's now-low neck.

If she'd landed a direct hit, his neck probably would have broken, but the assassin just barely managed to dodge the blow. Still, she grazed his shoulder with her foot, the force pulling him down to the ground.

That was it. Without muttering a word, Leticia brought her foot down on the assassin's gut. She felt the sickening sensation of her enemy's flesh and bones warping beneath her boot. That and pain.

...Pain? It was blinding pain. She cringed at the sensation. Still lying on the ground, the assassin was holding her leg to him. Leticia groaned in shock, feeling a sense of déjà vu.

In the assassin's hand was a bolt from her bowgun. It was likely the one that had been buried in him a moment ago. He'd jabbed that bolt into Leticia's leg, in the same spot he'd tried to stab her with the knife earlier.

He just... feigned throwing the bolt away and held onto it?! She leaped back, cursing. She was losing feeling in her leg. The sense of control she had over her muscles faded and she was left with only pain.

She saw the assassin standing, cradling his stomped ribs. He was definitely the more hurt of the two. Leticia groaned. She couldn't move her leg and her bowgun was on the ground.

"Heal up," the assassin suddenly said to her.

Leticia grinned wryly and spoke back to him. "And you'll attack me while I do so, right?"

"Long legs. They're very long legs. Your legs," the assassin muttered, also suddenly. It didn't seem like he was joking around. He was staring at her

dispassionately, holding his bleeding stomach.

Leticia frowned, confused.

He went on. "I'm just curious, that's all." He stopped to take a breath. Getting shot with the bowgun and then having his gut stomped on really seemed to have left him heavily wounded. He couldn't hide the sound of his breathing in the darkness anymore and was panting heavily instead. Still, his voice, at least, remained calm. "Leticia MacCready. One of the prized sorcerers of the famed Tower of Fangs. Unmistakably the strongest battle sportswoman."

"Sportsman."

"Battle sportsman. I can't imagine I could win against you." He corrected himself more readily than she expected. As if even he found it funny, he smiled a little. "Yet for some reason, it almost seems like we can go toe-to-toe. I wonder why."

"..."

"You've only been using your legs all this time. I thought you must just be sloppy or you were underestimating me, but neither of those seem true. I wonder... is there some reason you can't use your arms?"

Leticia went pale and hid her left arm behind her... even though there wasn't much of a scar left at all, and you'd have to look at it from very close to tell. That was the exact wrong thing to do, of course. She clicked her tongue. She'd fallen for his provocation.

After she hid her arm, she realized the ridiculousness of it all. Leticia held up her left arm so that he could easily see it.

She made a fist. But it was only four of her fingers that bent. Her little finger only trembled, not moving.

"I'm not teasing you. It's an old wound... well, not *that* old, I suppose. But it didn't heal all the way. That's all."

"I see."

"I can use my right just fine."

"So you don't want to fight with just one hand. I see. I thought it was strange,

you relying upon your weapon so much.” As he spoke, the assassin’s wounds seemed to be worsening—his face was deathly pale, though his wide-open eyes were bloodshot.

But her situation was getting worse too. She could feel her stabbed leg shaking more and more.

Leticia lowered her arm and asked him, “So you didn’t know about Krylancelo, but you know about me?”

“Of course I do. I know all the sorcerers who are stronger than me. As for your little brother... of course I know him. I might even have been ordered to kill you two at one point.”

That was as far as he got. The assassin fell to his knees, panting even more heavily, as if he’d run out of strength.

“Why are you... meddling... like this? You’re not the type to get involved in such violence... At least, I hadn’t thought so.”

There was obviously no merit in responding to his dying nonsense, yet Leticia looked down on the assassin and shook her head.

She told herself that she wasn’t feeling pity. Still unsure of exactly what it was, she told him, “I heard... a voice. One night. I woke up suddenly, and it was calling me.”

“That makes no sense... You got in our way... for a reason like that?”

“The people you killed probably thought the exact same thing.” She regretted making the jab against the dying man the moment the words were out of her lips, but he actually seemed to enjoy what she’d said.

He laughed, then grunted in pain from his spasming diaphragm. “Yeah... guess so. Guess you’re right.” After a fit of hysterical laughter, the assassin suddenly lowered his voice. “Well, while you’re at it... could you stop... Master Seek too? He said he’d lose you and then... fulfill our mission. If you stop him, he might get away with just being taken prisoner... I might too.”

“He’s already—” Leticia started to say, but the assassin stopped her with a strained smile.

“You might think you’ve taken him out already, but... there’s no way. He’s headed for the lord right now.”

“I have no right to pass judgment on you two. But I also have no obligation to save you,” she told him coldly.

The assassin just smiled again. No, maybe he was crying. “Guess that’s true, but... it sure is harsh.”

“How many of the lord’s soldiers did you kill, anyway? Even if they capture you now, I don’t think you’ll get a very lenient punishment.”

“We didn’t kill them,” he whispered so quietly she couldn’t hear him.

Leticia blinked and strained her ears and he repeated himself.

“We didn’t kill them... It’s strange... very strange. We didn’t have to kill them... They were already dead by the time we got here.”

“Do you really think I’ll believe that?”

“You won’t... judge me, right? That’s why... I’m telling you. You don’t need to... believe me. Just listen,” the assassin whispered quickly, sweating more and more. He didn’t look like he was lying.

Leticia frowned. *What is he saying?* Before she could figure that out, he continued, his body swaying with his words.

“Irgitte too... By the time we got here... she was already half-dead. We tried to help her, but there was nothing we could do... She’d gone mad, so we couldn’t even get near her.” The assassin raised his head, but his eyes were unfocused now. “We thought... maybe you had done it... killed all these soldiers. But from what I’ve seen... you couldn’t have, could you? No, that’s not the problem. Seek said that... they were all killed by unarmed blows. That it wasn’t something a human could do... That it was almost like... a dragon...”

“So there’s... another assassin?” she asked.

The young man before her whose name she still couldn’t recall managed to nod. But just then...

She heard the sound of shoes scraping against the earth.

Something cold ran down her spine—it was like everything the assassin had told her was flooding her brain with too much information. She couldn't move. Her injured leg was already immobilized. And while she stood there, frozen, the scenery before her changed twice.

The first thing she saw was a person materializing behind the assassin. A middle-aged soldier wielding a sword. The sword flashed and the man cut off the young assassin's head.

Then everything before her shook and she couldn't see anything anymore. She was rolling on the ground—she understood that, at least. She'd taken a blow from behind. A powerful impact had sent her flying. The rotation finally stopped and she looked up from the ground to see a young soldier with a gun in his hand. Smoke was coming out of the muzzle. Leticia reached behind her back. There was the sticky texture of blood where her hand touched. She understood quickly that she'd been shot. She looked down and saw a small hole in the midsection of her combat gear. The bullet must have exited her stomach through her back.

She didn't recognize the two new soldiers, but she had no doubt they were part of the lord's private army. She could hear the one with the sword muttering quietly.

“Now I can finally drink.”

Leticia screamed and at the same time, a sorcerous composition manifested all on its own. The body of the young soldier standing there stiffly with the gun broke apart—it was like something inside the man's body had folded him into a mass of flesh that no longer resembled a human being. Crushed by a sudden explosion of pressure, the man simply ceased to exist without even time for his blood to spray.

The other man may have cursed or something, but Leticia wasn't listening. She still couldn't move her body, but she managed to at least turn her face his way. He had lifted his sword and was charging at her, so she let out another furious scream at him.

It wasn't a scream with any sort of meaning. It probably just sounded like a shriek to him. But the sound brought a sorcerous composition with it.

The man's body was swallowed by flames. He melted away and vanished in a blaze of heat and light.

A scream still in her ears, Leticia let her head fall powerlessly to the ground. She couldn't move. She couldn't speak.

Am I... she thought. She could see the night sky. She shuddered from the feeling of her blood pouring out from her wound. *Am I going to die?*

"I can heal you, you know. What will you do, Leticia MacCready?"

Leticia's thoughts stopped when she heard the voice. She looked up at the night sky and looking back down at her was a man.

Damian Rue. Leticia attempted a small smile. He'd finally shown himself.

She was still breathing, her exhausted lungs still expanding and contracting. She knew that no matter how painful it was, it was better than stopping. If she stopped, she'd never be able to start again.

Leticia opened her eyelids, but that did nothing to stop the world from fading around her. She couldn't lift a single finger. She was losing body heat. No matter how much oxygen her lungs took in, there wasn't enough blood left in her blood vessels to ferry it to the rest of her body.

Her death was approaching rapidly. She knew this, yet Leticia couldn't keep herself from smiling. She could see Damian Rue's face. He was close enough that she could reach him.

He went on with complete confidence. "I still don't understand your objective. I can't heal you until I hear it... You understand, don't you?"

"My... ob...jec...tive... is..." Leticia raised her voice, emphasizing each syllable. Her breath ran out there.

It looked like Damian's face got a little closer to her. He must have knelt down.

Does he think I died? Leticia slipped the parrying dagger out of the sheath on the back of her waist, where her left hand was resting. It was a weapon for sport, so it wasn't very practical in a fight, but the handguard stabilized her wrist, so she could use it in her impaired left hand.

She lifted her upper body and let the knife fly. The thick blade stabbed into Damian's mouth. The white sorcerer didn't even try to dodge it. It was only after the blade reached his brain that he pulled back with a shocked expression on his face.



Chapter VI: Sixth Result of Death

“What’s this garden?” Orphen looked up at the gate, crossing his arms. The iron, serpentine gate.

“My lord’s mansion is through here,” Winona responded.

He could have guessed that, though he didn’t say that to her. Orphen moved his gaze from the gate to Winona, then to Lottecia. “You okay?”

They’d walked a long distance. The location where she’d seen Leki had been several hours to the west. Normally, she wouldn’t have the stamina to keep up with them, but she seemed more energized than usual, her eyes moist. It probably wasn’t that she wasn’t fatigued, she just wasn’t feeling it. She was holding her sword to her chest and breathing hard, her cheeks flushed.

“Yes.” She stepped forward eagerly. “Ed is here?”

“I told you he wasn’t,” Winona said bluntly. She popped the revolving cylinder out from her gun and checked the bullets inside. “Weren’t you listening to me?”

“I didn’t ask you,” Lottecia told her flatly.

Returning the cylinder to its place in the frame with a louder noise than was necessary, Winona gave the swordswoman a glare. “Well, you’ve certainly gotten cocky, haven’t you?”

“There’s something about you that I don’t like. I never have.”

“You think you’re safe now that you know how to use that sword?”

Apparently she wasn’t foolish enough to point her gun at Lottecia. Winona holstered the weapon and merely scoffed at the girl.

Lottecia, on the other hand, wasn’t experienced enough to ignore Winona’s provocation and raised her voice quite a bit. “It’s my father’s sword. And since I can use it now, I intend to use it as skillfully as he did.”

“I mean, if you think you can kill Yuis with a little stick like that, I invite you to try—”

“Would you shut up?” Orphen quietly interjected.

Winona glared sharply at him and Lottecia gave her a triumphant smile, so he turned to her next.

“You too, Lottecia. Were you really not listening? Didn’t I tell you in Urbanrama? To remember how the air feels if you want to find something that works against Colgon?”

“Huh?”

Orphen gave Lottecia a cold look for her blank stare. He took a deep breath, adjusting the collar of his combat gear. The darkness around them was getting deeper and hazier.

“Winona. Does your lord not keep guards nearby?”

“Of course he does. There are plenty of them stationed here.”

“Well, they’re all dead now.” It wasn’t some sense he had or the smell. Still, Orphen could state that fact with complete confidence as he peered into the dark garden.

“Are they?” Winona responded without any particular emotion. She continued candidly, “Well, I went around the whole perimeter first and this is the last place I haven’t been. Makes sense the assassins would get here before we did, doesn’t it?”

“Shouldn’t you have come here first?” Lottecia said thornily, still dragging out their confrontation.

With a snort, Winona answered, “It’s just stupid to tighten your defenses against assassins. You gotta find ‘em and hunt ‘em down yourself.”

“It doesn’t matter. All you can do is run.”

“What?” Winona asked.

Orphen shrugged. “If you’re really being targeted by assassins, then defending and attacking are both pointless. All you can do is run. After all, there are any number of replacements for the assassins, but the target only has one life.”

“My lord wouldn’t run. Not him.”

“Then he’ll just die. It’s none of my business, but if harm comes to Claiomh and Majic, then...” He cut himself off there.

Winona must have thought he was hesitant to continue. She smirked. “If harm comes to them, what’ll happen?”

Really, what was he planning on doing? Orphen sighed, thinking to himself, *Am I gonna kill everyone I don’t like?* He felt a sense of emptiness at having such violent thoughts with no emotion behind them. He wondered if it was the result of his combat gear—the Tower of Fangs combat uniform. The clothes seemed to put him into a certain mindset. His equipment made his objective clear and solidified his intent. He felt like he understood why Leticia had gone out of her way to bring a set for him too.

Tish had prepared herself for something, he thought to himself as he remembered his sister the last time he saw her. *She seemed to be telling me to make my mind up about something too... And since she brought me a gun like this, I’m guessing what she wants me to do is fight.*

What was he supposed to be fighting, though? She hadn’t told him.

For the time being, he had to stop the Thirteen Apostles assassins.

But as he peered into the darkness of the garden, he couldn’t sense anyone inside. Orphen groaned. “Seems like it all ended a while ago... I don’t think there’s just one or two bodies in there.”

“I haven’t heard anything from Damian. That means it’s not over yet,” Winona said with full confidence.

Orphen frowned. He checked a few pieces of his equipment and asked her, “Can you check with him yourself?”

“If he feels like it, yeah. I thought I almost heard a voice earlier, but it stopped before it actually told me anything. Worst part about it is you can’t tell if you’re just hearing things.”

He thought she might be joking, but judging from her face, Winona seemed to be serious. If she was, though, that was just fine. “You two stay here,” Orphen told them.

“Don’t be stupid. It’s my job to protect my lord.” There was an air of intimidation to Winona’s words.

Orphen shrugged. “Do what you want, then. I’m going to act on my own. I don’t want anyone holding me back against assassins. I had enough of that in Urbanrama.”

“I...” Lottecia piped up, sounding troubled, and Orphen turned to her.

“Do what you like,” Orphen said, though he hardly needed to. “I’m acting on my own. Even if you follow me, you won’t find Colgon. If he *were* here, he wouldn’t have let enemies infiltrate this far.”

There didn’t seem to be any problems with his equipment—excluding the ill-maintained gun. Everything was easily accessible to him.

He thought of Seek Marrisk’s face. He didn’t know the man all that well, but since he was a member of the Thirteen Apostles and a Stabber on top of that, he was doubtless going to be several leagues ahead of Orphen, who’d spent several years not doing much of anything after leaving the Tower. The other man, his student, whatever his name had been, was likely an even more accomplished caster if he’d been brought along to a place like this. Still, he strangely felt no fear.

I wonder why... I’m not scared.

A different face came to mind then. Helpart. The Red Dragon assassin. The man he’d destroyed in Urbanrama. He should have been the most powerful adversary Orphen had ever been forced to fight. But he wasn’t afraid of Helpart anymore either. He even felt some pity for the face that had vanished into those flames.

I wonder why.

Orphen looked into the darkness of the garden as a question that had nothing to do with the situation before him came to mind. The dark quiet seemed to beg an answer from him.



Seek Marrisk looked up at the mansion, feeling a deep emotion that seemed

entirely out of place. So many agents had tried to make it here, maybe even *had* made it here, but none of them had ever come back. That was undoubtedly a point of frustration for Master Pluto. The boss of the black sorcerers, who in his recent years had even begun calling himself an Archmage for his inhuman level of power. The lord of the Imminent Domain was the only person he could consider an enemy, and was the worst possible enemy he could have. He'd finally decided to challenge this enemy, and one of the assassins he'd sent after him was Seek.

What would Master Childman Powderfield have done? Seek ruminated on pointless thoughts. Pluto would have taken no notice of the young assassin, but there were many who considered them to be of a similar power level. If the assassin from the Tower of Fangs was going to fight the lord of the Imminent Domain, what would he have done? Would he have used his student, the Razor-Sharp Successor?

If that's the reason Krylancelo is here, then I suppose it would make sense... He wasn't sure he believed that, though.

Seek had never met the sorcerer called Childman, but he'd heard countless rumors. Maybe it was just an exaggerated story that he'd snuck into Kimluck on his own to assassinate the pope, but if it wasn't... Would he have infiltrated the Imminent Domain by himself too? That also seemed ridiculous to him.

No, he probably wouldn't do anything. He wouldn't even try to fight the lord of the Imminent Domain.

His cause for believing that was tenuous. From everything he'd heard, Childman didn't go against the wishes of the top brass of the Tower. He knew that going against them was pointless. That no matter how he defied them, there were certain things he just wouldn't be able to do.

Seek looked up skeptically at the mansion that likely housed his target. He wouldn't succeed in his assassination. He wouldn't be able to kill the lord. He got that sense, though it didn't cause him any distress. There was no uplifting hope for his success as he opened the door, just dejection and a sense that his death was rapidly approaching.

I wonder what happened to Kakorkist... Did he challenge Leticia MacCready? If

it goes well, perhaps he'll only be captured. She won't kill her enemies... No, I wonder... He didn't know. But there was a voice deep inside his ear that he didn't think was just his imagination. In the capital, an enraged Master Pluto had appointed a second assassin.

Was it Maria Huwon? That was an interesting idea.

He couldn't enjoy the thought, though. He put his hand on the door to the mansion. All the guards in the garden had been dead, and he sensed the same thick scent of death from inside the building. He felt sweat beading on his shaved head as his breath caught in his throat.



The garden was quiet.

The quiet darkness was not simple stillness—it wasn't sound or color but something he felt with his skin.

Orphen tried not to let it bother him as he proceeded through the darkness. He had a halfhearted vigilance over his surroundings, but even that might have been pointless. As he walked, he encountered nothing but corpses.

What is this...? They were all people who looked like they worked for the lord. They must have been protecting the garden. There was nothing unnatural about that. The unnatural thing was the state of the corpses.

Orphen stopped and peered down at a man whose head had been pulverized. There was no doubt that he had died instantly. His neck was twisted, his warped jaw frozen in a demented smile.

What do you have to do to make a corpse like this? It's not sorcery. The power is concentrated too much in one spot.

It was like a wedge had been driven into the body. Only destructive force concentrated on one spot for one instant could do something like this. It wasn't the excessive force of sorcery.

A dragon? No, it's not that either. A super high-caliber gun...? No. All of the corpses only have one wound. They've all been killed with one strike. Guns weren't so reliable. No gun could hit its mark every single time.

“You thinkin’ about how sorry you feel for them?”

Orphen turned around at the sudden voice. It wasn’t out of surprise. Winona had followed him the whole way in from the gate. He smiled wryly and told her, “I said I was going on my own, didn’t I?”

“We’re just going the same way. I’ve gotta go protect my lord.” Winona pursed her lips in annoyance.

Orphen scratched his head. “Then you don’t need to stop with me, do you?”

“Oh, shut up. Lottecia’s the only one holding you back, right? Not me,” she said with a wave of her hand.

And Lottecia hadn’t followed them from the garden entrance. Orphen had suspected she’d be dissatisfied being the only one left behind, but that hadn’t seemed to be the case. He sighed, remembering how she’d nodded simply, holding the sword to her chest.

He was about to say, “There’s no difference,” but held his tongue—getting into an argument wouldn’t solve anything. He pointed down at the corpse. “Do you think anything when you see this corpse?”

“That he won’t be any use to my lord anymore.”

“Will you use your brain a little more? Have you seen a corpse like this before?”

Finally understanding what he was trying to say, Winona put her hand to her chin and went quiet. It wasn’t for long, but her face went back to that of a talented soldier from the enraged fanatic look she was wearing before.

After a moment, she opened her mouth. “Yeah, in the capital. There was a bird flying way high up in the sky and some idiot who wasn’t very lucky.”

“Huh?”

She came out of the thoughtful look and explained. “I dunno what it was trying to do, but one day it dropped a rock from the sky. Just a little pebble, really. But this unlucky idiot was walking below that. I just remembered that.”

“You might be on the right track with that.” Orphen groaned and walked off once more.

Following him, Winona asked, “What are you saying? You’re not gonna tell me a bird did this, are you?”

“At the very least, it was a weapon with the same amount of force. This wasn’t sorcery—there’s no spell with this level of precision. You think the Thirteen Apostles used some kinda new weapon of theirs?”

“Not one I’ve heard of. Which means it doesn’t exist.”

“Well, I guess that means a bird did it.” Orphen sped off, frustrated. Deep inside the garden, he could see the shadow of the large mansion.

It’s not the Thirteen Apostles... If they had some sort of secret weapon, Irgitte would probably tell me about it.

His view opened up. The forest here had been burned down. A large swathe of trees had been mowed down in one direction. *This* was the work of sorcery—he had no doubts about that.

The next thing he saw was a body on the ground that he recognized. With a gasp, Orphen ran to the figure. “Irgitte!”

The burned earth swallowed his boots up to the ankle with each step. And on that burned earth, Irgitte lay facedown. She was heavily injured—so heavily that Orphen first assumed she was a corpse. She was missing an arm and there was a sword lying next to her. Its blade was broken halfway through, but he recognized this as well. It was the sword Seek had been carrying.

Orphen lifted Irgitte up and brushed the dirt from her face and hair. He could barely believe it, but she was breathing. She’d been burned terribly. This wasn’t something he could heal with his sorcery. Still, he found himself composing the spell, and just before he could deploy it, Irgitte reached out and touched his hand. He looked down at her scorched fingers. She was trembling.

“What is this...? What happened?” He had an idea, but he asked anyway.

He couldn’t imagine she could see anymore, but her eyes turned toward him. Until then, she’d also been looking at his fingers. She coughed and said, “An assassin...”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. Don’t talk.”

There was a whistle when she spoke, like air was leaking from a punctured lung. Even saying one word was probably agonizing for her. Orphen covered Irgitte's mouth with her hand to stop her from talking.

But her hand reached up again and swatted his away. Groaning, she continued. "Everyone... Everyone died! They're probably dead too... Leticia. And Kakorkist."

"Stop it!" Orphen bit his lip, but she didn't stop.

She thrust her chest forward in his arms like she was trying to sit up and wailed, "I'm already dead too! That's why I heard the voice... I still hear it now. It's why I can still talk when I'm supposed to be dead..." She went silent as if thinking about something. Or maybe she was listening to some voice that only she could hear. "To convey them to you... I need to convey them to you too!"

"Calm down. You're confused."

"Krylancelo... This is a message. You can forget it now, but remember it when you need to." She gripped his arm.

It was strange that she still had so much grip strength. Enough to hold him here and say what she had to say.

All he could do was listen to Irgitte's words. He looked down at her as her life rapidly faded.

"Your family is waiting... The three will come together in fourteen days!" She gave a hacking cough. She might not have even had enough blood left to cough it up, but it was easy to see that her organs were damaged. Irgitte's breath clearly had the smell of blood on it. "This is a message, not a prediction... Don't forget it. It won't happen if you don't wish for it to. Someone's... waiting for you at the sanctuary..."

Waiting at the sanctuary.

In fourteen days.

Orphen repeated the words to himself. He almost closed his eyes for a moment, feeling his consciousness attempt to wander somewhere far away, but he stopped himself. He couldn't help feeling that Irgitte wanted him to

return her gaze.

She stopped speaking. Her fitful breaths suddenly weakened.

She opened her mouth for one last time—Orphen knew it would be the last when it happened. And she spoke in a voice that was different from the one she'd been using thus far, weaker.

"I had more I wanted to say, but I can't do it anymore."

Orphen laid Irgitte on the ground after she passed. He looked down at the hands he'd been holding her with. There was no blood on them. Just the sensation of touching the half-dried liquid that had seeped out of her.

Winona had approached him from behind at some point, and he heard her speak to him.

"We don't have time to bury her."

He thought about hitting her, but decided not to. It would only be taking out his feelings on her.

Whether she'd sensed that or not, she went on, "Don't tell me you're gonna cry over something like this. There's plenty of other corpses lying around. What's special about this one?"

Orphen stood, but he didn't turn around. He looked down at Irgitte's expression in death, and at the broken sword beside her.

"It was the Thirteen Apostles who killed her. The methods are different from the rest of the bodies."

"Huh." Winona didn't seem particularly interested in that fact. Orphen glanced at her and she was paying more attention to the lord's mansion. All she cared about was her lord's safety, evidently. "What do we do?" she asked him hurriedly.

"What we do hasn't changed. We stop this stupid conflict from happening," Orphen answered, looking up at the mansion towering before them as well.

The mansion was even quieter than the garden. There wasn't any light at all leaking from inside it. A building this large and old should have creaked, but it

made no noise either. It merely stood there like a night shadow rising out of the earth.

The door was open and it would never close again. Not unless it was fixed.

It had been torn from its hinges completely as if with some sort of large-scale explosive. There were no burns, however. Just scattered fragments of the door lying nearby. Two fragments made up the largest parts of the door.

On one of them was Seek's right side. His left side was stuck to the other.

There the assassin was, split in two, his own blood acting as an adhesive.

"This is..." Even Winona's voice was trembling slightly with fear now. She took her gun out and held it ready... No, it was more like clinging to a cane. "This wasn't done by a bird."

Orphen glared into the mansion without answering. Beyond the door was an entrance hall.

There was no one there. He didn't sense a single person. He dragged his feet, stepping inside.

After taking a few steps, Orphen spun around and faced the outside. The door had split in two from the inside. He stood facing the now deceased Seek and Winona, who'd broken out into a cold sweat.

Orphen looked down. There were footprints. Two marks where feet had embedded themselves in the wooden flooring.

Comparing the footprints to his own feet, Orphen clenched his fists. He got into a fighting stance.

"...What are you doing?" Winona asked him.

Orphen told her quietly, "Somebody standing here like this blew Seek Marrisk back to where he is now. With enough force in one blow to split his body in two. Whoever did it killed all the soldiers as well."

"D'you understand what you're saying?" Winona asked him mockingly. She strode into the mansion and waved her right hand—the one not holding the gun—in the air as she asked him, "Are you trying to tell me somebody did this by striking them with their bare hands?"

“I dunno. When it comes to sheer destructive power, sorcery beats this. So it’s not as if we have no means to fight this guy.”

However, the Thirteen Apostles assassin, who had likely thought the same thing, had been killed without being able to raise a finger against his attacker. Orphen left that little fact out of his statement.

He pulled his feet out of the footprints and moved to the side, looking up to the ceiling. “More importantly, Claiomh. You said she’s here? How is this place safe?”

“My lord said he’d protect those kids. They’re safe.”

“The enemies are right here in your goddamn bedroom!” he spat.

There were no life signs he could identify in the mansion. Orphen felt a horrible chill in the pit of his stomach as he held a hand to his forehead. Considering Claiomh... Considering Majic... He couldn’t help feeling like the two of them would jump out at the first sign of trouble and get killed in no time. If Leki really wasn’t here like Lottecia had said, then...

“Where in the mansion are they?!” he demanded of Winona, practically grabbing at her.

She stepped back as she answered, “I don’t know that. I just brought them here. But... my lord’s chambers are on the fourth floor. He wanted to talk to the two of them, so they might be there.”

“Tch!” Orphen clicked his tongue, rushing deeper into the mansion. It was a large building, but it wasn’t hard to find the stairs. He didn’t find any more bodies lying around either. There was no sign of fighting—outside of the entrance hall, that was. But the mansion was filled with an oppressive silence that seemed to make it hard to breathe.

He ran up the stairs and kicked open the first door he found, ignoring Winona following after him. With her shouts behind him, he rushed into the room.

Moonlight streamed into the dark room from the window. Compared to the dark of the room, this light was almost daylight. He could see a pitch-black, stout, person-shaped shadow in the middle of the room.

At the figure's feet lay a middle-aged man. He looked slim. Orphen's heart sank as he thought about how pointless it was to wonder about the original form of the body sinking into the puddle of blood. His chest and stomach were crushed as if by a boulder. The huge wound (it seemed ridiculous to even call it that) might have even pierced through to his back. His eyes were rolled back in his head, almost popped out of his sockets. His throat and tongue were both sticking out of his mouth.

"My lord!" Winona cried. It wasn't quite a scream. She charged into the room at the shadowy figure with a rage-filled shout, muscling past Orphen.

The figure barely moved. It probably wasn't quite as large as Winona, but as the woman lunged at it, it barely touched her and she simply went flying backward. Toward the window.

With a loud crash, the glass shattered. Tearing straight through the shining glass and the frame, Winona's body flew out from the fourth-floor window. She disappeared from sight after that, falling to the ground.

Orphen didn't move, just staring at the remaining figure before him. From its original position, it had only moved one arm slightly. Though it was dressed in black, it didn't fade into the darkness of the room but stood out clearly from it somehow. A black hat worn low covered its face. Its clothing almost seemed like religious robes. Like priest's robes.

In a low whisper, the man in the robes began to speak.

"There are flaws in the Network. Focus too hard on one thing and the rest becomes neglected to the extreme. A natural flaw of a human being handling information that surpasses their processing power."

What was he saying? Orphen put a hand to his heart, which had started beating faster.

The man continued without intonation. "In other words, it's not good for plotting."

He raised his head and it was just a normal man's face saying, "Hmm... So that man was the lord after all. I thought I would just kill everyone I ran across. Seemed the surest way."

The man seemed to be speaking of the crushed corpse under his feet.

This is... the lord of the Imminent Domain? Orphen looked down. He was dead. He was hopelessly dead.

That was the only corpse in the room. Orphen glanced around frantically, trying to find a stray blonde hair poking out from behind some furniture. Suddenly...

He leaped to the side. At the very edge of his vision, the man in the priest's robes was walking past him, bringing his arms down in a dance-like gesture. He'd dodged the blow at the last second, slamming his feet into the ground. He froze, getting ready to counterattack, and captured the man in his sight.

He's using martial arts?!

There were no tricks.

It was no secret weapon either.

The man was simply using his bare hands.

With them alone, he'd piled up that mountain of corpses.

You've gotta be kidding me... That's not possible! He ground his teeth as he thought to himself.

He thought he'd be attacked again quickly, but the man was just standing there still. Looking straight at him, the man casually said, "You use your own dreadful style, I see. It's not bad. You're quite skilled. It's makeshift skill, however."

"...What?" Orphen spoke quietly, trying not to let the man sense how hard he was breathing. He thought it was probably pointless, though. As if just by standing opposite him, he was letting his enemy know more than he knew. A shudder of certainty passed through him.

Beyond his stiff fist, the man in the priest's robes casually said, "There's no conviction in your technique. That's all."

"Ugh..."

The man standing right in front of him seemed to swell up like he was

exploding.

It was an illusion—Orphen knew that, knew that he was just approaching rapidly, but it was like there was no time at all to prepare himself before the man made contact. His enemy's fist touched him. He couldn't avoid it. His body reflexively stuck both hands out to defend himself, but he also found himself hesitating.

He recalled the corpse. He wouldn't be able to defend against this. Not against this enemy's fists.

He twisted. He knew he wouldn't be able to avoid the blow entirely. But if he couldn't at least knock his enemy off balance slightly and lessen the force of the blow, he wouldn't even be able to pity the corpse in this room anymore.

Something grazed his body. It didn't amount to much contact—just brushed against the surface of his combat gear.

But an impact that he worried might burst his internal organs sent him flying backward.

There was nothing he could do. The blow connected and he impacted the wall of the room. It was lucky it wasn't the window. No, maybe he would have a higher chance of surviving falling out of a four-story window. Orphen peeled himself from the wall, groaning with the pain, and faced the man again. The man in the priest's robes was taking another stance.

There was nothing Orphen could do to win with martial arts in this situation.

He was forced to admit that.

"It's the Demolishing Fist," the man said, amused. "You've got good instincts. I didn't think there would be someone here who could dodge it."

A strike that creates an impact from the smallest possible movement... I'd say it's something like that, at least. It's not super rare or anything, though his strength is off the charts. If he took a hit, he'd be done for.

No, he'd probably be dead.

Could you really obtain power like this just through training? Without the help of sorcery?

Sorcery... Orphen considered the word, organizing his thoughts. His opponent was just a regular human, not a sorcerer. But he couldn't fight him without sorcery. He wasn't even sure if he'd be able to hold back against him.

But before he could begin to compose a spell, the man's words slipped into his ears to stop him.

"So you're a sorcerer."

He was wearing the combat gear of the Tower, so it wasn't strange that someone would be able to figure that out. Still, he felt like that had nothing to do with it and the man had read his mind or something. Orphen didn't say anything, and while the composition he was about to weave faded from his mind, the man continued speaking.

"That's right. The only thing you have to defeat me is your sorcery. But can you do it? Do you have the nerve and wit to attempt an attack that your adversary has foreseen?"

That was likely exactly how Seek had died. The assassin's unsightly death flitted across his mind. Yet the only way Seek could have resisted this man was with his sorcery.

Orphen, however, had one other method.

His hand brushed against the holster on his hip. His opponent hadn't seemed to have noticed, but this weapon could bring their battle to an end in an instant.

No one's performed maintenance on this gun in years... Can I shoot it? There's probably a higher chance it'll misfire. Still, those were better odds than just continuing as he was.

...Are they really? he asked himself. Orphen stared at his adversary, loath to remove his hand from the holster. If he had attacked him quickly, there likely wouldn't have been anything he could have done. But the man was clearly finding some enjoyment in the idea of their fistfight. Orphen could guess why that was. There was a good chance there hadn't been many people who had been able to dodge two of his attacks before. The man had an inquisitive spark in his eyes.

What had he seen in Orphen's eyes? It was like his mouth was about to form

a smile, but it swiftly returned to a neutral line.

His expression returning to plain indifference, he asked, “Do you feel no despair? It seems you still have some sort of strategy.”

That was a familiar word...

Orphen said nothing in response and the man went on, “There are no gods anymore. I wonder when mankind figured that out.” The man made a gesture similar to the holy sign, ignoring the corpse at his feet.

“Maybe they started to realize an extraordinarily long time ago. Or maybe it was just yesterday. Of course, since they realized but still have not discarded their regrets, the day when they will truly understand doesn’t seem to have come yet. That is why I will stubbornly repeat myself. As many times as it takes. As long as I have the time. The gods... no longer... exist.” He finished his speech theatrically, emphasizing each word.

Suddenly, the man spread his arms, opening up his stance. He had let his guard down, in other words. But Orphen didn’t think he could launch an attack and win.

“There is no father who will reward you for good deeds. There is no promise that will punish evil. Not in this world. This world... is ruthless. How do we endure? When there are no gods. The dragons made the gods nothing more than absurd monsters. No, worse, they solved the mysteries of the gods. We can no longer hope for any sort of fantasy in this world. We can no longer love our neighbors in this world.” The man’s voice rose from a murmur to a recitation and continued climbing. “Has humanity become independent after losing the gods? No, we cannot do that either. People are still praying now, even though they know there are no gods to answer those prayers. They follow us everywhere. Human hearts that fill with despair when they learn of the absence of the gods—”

Just before the man’s voice became a scream, he stopped. As if awakening from a trance, he calmed and stared at Orphen. “What did Ryan speak of when he died? I have an idea.”

So he’s... a friend of Ryan’s, Orphen thought to himself. An agent of the sanctuary. Doppel X.

So the lord of the Imminent Domain, who picked a fight with the sanctuary, had been killed by the sanctuary. That was all that had happened. It was nothing unusual.

Still, Orphen asked with a groan, "A blonde girl... and a kid who looks like her little brother. Did you kill them? They should have been in this mansion."

"Couldn't say. I don't remember that," the man answered calmly. "But there are no longer any living people remaining in this mansion. It's just you and me."

"Is that so..."

His response could be interpreted in several ways. Claiomh and Majic may have been killed. But they also may have left the mansion before this man arrived.

He couldn't say which was more likely. But if he was going to figure out the answer, then he couldn't be killed here.

Orphen removed his hand from the holster. He couldn't use the gun. He needed a more certain method.

What can I do...? A bead of sweat ran down his cheek.

"Oh?" Curiosity returned to the man's eyes. He raised his eyebrows with an impressed grunt. "You mean to finish this with your fists?"

Observing Orphen's stance, the man in the priest's robes took a stance of his own. "You don't look like you're rising to my provocation. Are you a warrior? No, that's not it. You're the same as me. You're no warrior..."

"Quit babbling, idiot," Orphen spat.

The man in the priest's robes raised his eyebrows. "Do you dispute what I have said?"

"No. Sounds right to me. That's why I'm calling you an idiot." Orphen smiled at the man, who was giving him a baffled look. He took his combat stance.

The man took a stance that looked exaggerated to Orphen. He lowered his hips, sliding his legs forward and back and pulling his right shoulder in. It called to mind a single line connecting him to his opponent. It started at his feet and rose through his legs, shoulders, and fists to pierce his enemy's body. That was

the natural course of his strength.

The strength this enemy had used to kill dozens of people in one night. That very same strength. He could do the same thing to Orphen. Orphen believed that wholeheartedly. He could kill a person with a single blow. It would be easy for him.

It was something he'd learned from Childman. He would do the same thing Childman had done. There was no enemy he could not defeat.

Staring down that straight line, Orphen affirmed that to himself.

It was something he'd heard from Claiomh.

"There are no gods," he quietly admitted to himself.

"People are not independent," he coldly accepted.

"But I will not despair."

Closing his mouth, Orphen hardened his fists and lunged forward with an explosive sound.





The man's tilted head... broke deeper to the side. And her parrying dagger, stuck deep into his palate, moved with it. Looking up at that from the lowest position on the ground, Leticia let her smile fade. She'd dealt a blow to him. A heavy blow. She pinned her trembling left hand in place with her right hand. The dagger, which shouldn't have fit there, was stuck inside the white sorcerer's mouth. She could still feel the sensation of the blade penetrating the soft flesh within his jaws.

She didn't vomit. When the time came, she even heard a voice saying, "What's the big deal after everything else?" It was her own voice. She'd already seen a ridiculous amount of corpses this night.

That headless assassin's corpse curled up on the ground, for instance. Catching a glimpse of it out of the corner of her eye, Leticia smiled wryly. She couldn't mock him anymore. What she was doing now was assassination too.

Damian Rue slowly bent back toward the ground... and when his face was pointed at the sky, his movement stopped.

Leticia watched her dagger fall to the ground. The white sorcerer raised his head and faced her.

He was unharmed.

"You cannot hurt me with something like this."

"The knife was just for taking you by surprise," Leticia whispered quickly. She sat up. Her body was racked by a numbing pain, but she ignored it and rose to her feet. Her body was no longer composed of flesh and bone, merely nerves aflame with that pain. Trembling, she faced off against the white sorcerer.

Her voice, at least, left her throat far easier than she thought it would. "I used that single instant of fear you felt for me to seal your abilities. Part of them, anyway."

Damian didn't look particularly perturbed. "That would be mental dominion. You couldn't possibly. What you're saying is preposterous. It goes against the rules..."

“You’re the one who’s been cheating from the start, aren’t you?” Leticia put her hand into a hidden pocket in her combat gear.

This man had been a spirit for longer than anyone else in history—he was a white sorcerer who had become far too powerful. Damian Rue was practically invincible. But he showed a single crack in that unassailable facade: a smile. And not just any smile. It was a smile of almost resigned shock.

“So your goal was to destroy me,” he murmured, as if the news was unexpected. “I don’t understand why... Do you benefit in some way from eliminating me? It would be so much easier if I could read your mind.”

Leticia wordlessly took out a small box from the hidden pocket. She was lucky it had survived her running around the burning garden. She gripped it tightly and a crack ran through the box.

She tossed it at the white sorcerer’s feet and shouted, “Light!”

She had no doubt that Damian wouldn’t interfere. She was sure that he would simply ignore it. With a roar, her sorcerous light enveloped the white sorcerer and its heat detonated the explosive she’d thrown.

It was a larger effect than she’d been expecting. The powerful shock wave mixed with the flames, creating a complex picture. The blast was so loud she thought she might lose her hearing, but it faded, replaced by Damian Rue’s quiet voice. Of course, it wasn’t his actual voice, so she wasn’t hearing it with her ears.

“If something like that worked against me...” he said, ever so quietly. “I wouldn’t even be able to best Pluto.”

The voice was full of confidence. He was still underestimating her, Leticia sensed with a smile.

She was a little disappointed she wouldn’t be able to see her opponent’s astonished face when he was taken by surprise, but by then, she was already in a place where she couldn’t see him. Her teleportation had started and she had lost her physical place in space.

She was likely still close enough for her thoughts to reach him, however. “It doesn’t matter,” she murmured. “All I have to do now is leave. You won’t get

your powers back until you kill me. From now on, you'll have to rise to my challenges even if you don't want to... but I don't have to go out of my way to fight when I'm injured."

"Leticia MacCready..." She could feel confusion in the white sorcerer's voice. "You teleported...? How? That power surpasses a human being's limits. It's power only a spirit could possess. Who are you? I'm certain you're receiving the support of an extremely powerful white sorcerer. But there is no white sorcerer whose power compares to mine! What does it mean? What is it that you're doing?"

"Damian Rue. I've only done the same as you've done," Leticia said as if plunging a knife into him. She told him sharply, "The fewer people utilizing a Network, the better. But the one who will reign supreme in the end is not you."

She wasn't used to teleporting, so it was taking a long time, but she had almost finished. In her last moment that she still had contact with him, she heard Damian Rue's shout. Leticia—and one other—were satisfied hearing the panic in his scream.

"I've got it... I've got it! I've figured out the identity of the power protecting you!" Damian screamed. "It's you! The Chaos Witch!"

Leticia vanished from that place.



In a room filled with the smell of rot, Colgon quietly counted time until his death. The rising numbers were the only thing that allowed him to sense the passage of time as he lay there unmoving, slowly melting away. He continued to count, engulfed in unfathomable numbness as his own body rotted.

How high had the numbers risen? He wasn't sure. His brain had deteriorated enough that he couldn't even count properly. He thought on that fact dispassionately. He'd lost any true emotion a little while ago. Once again, he dispassionately reasoned that that was because he'd lost the part of his brain that supplied them.

He had lost most of his awareness. That was the moment that he sensed he was nothing more than a lump of meat anymore. All there was inside his skull

was a small lump of meat. That lump of meat was him, and he could not escape from it. Even if his limbs still remained, he could no longer move them, so they were worthless to him. His nerves had been destroyed first.

After some time, numbers became meaningless to him too.

What came to mind instead of the numbers was words. Maybe he could no longer distinguish between numbers and words. Names. Several names floated up in his head and disappeared. But he didn't know what they meant either. A few of the names seemed to compel him to remember something, but... it was pointless. It was all fading away, leaving nothing behind.

This was true peace... Though he'd lost his ability to think and the concept should have been lost on him completely, Colgon still felt that. Being shut up inside his skull like this. There was no state of rest which surpassed it. All he had to do was count.

"I shall heal you."

He heard a voice, but even he wasn't sure whether he understood it. All he was aware of was something new intruding upon his peace and how irritating he found it.

The words ruining his quiet continued.

"The poison destroying you. I can cure you of it. Will you accept my mercy?"

It was a woman's voice. He looked up at her.

There was a woman there. With green hair. And green eyes.

The sanctuary. The word revived in his mind. *I'm in the sanctuary... That's why I was resting. That's why it was fine.*

The woman with the green eyes spun words like a song with a gentle curve of her lips. "I will take you in. If you accept us... If you accept the invitation of the sanctuary."

A Celestial.

A Weird Dragon. Nornir.

There was nothing their sorcery could not create. These dragons possessed

the ultimate techniques for creation. They granted humanity their culture and wisdom. True, no matter the poison, they could probably cure him of it. They could cure anything. This was the sanctuary. It wouldn't be strange to find them here.

Suddenly, he heard a voice asking him, "How can you see? Your vision should have been lost long ago, so how can you see?"

That was all he heard.

Colgon leaped up and shoved the woman away. She lost her balance without even time to make a surprised face and he got behind her, hooking his arm under her pointed chin and pressing against her throat. He froze. He wasn't constricting her artery, so she wouldn't pass out, but she shouldn't be able to breathe.

"Cure me," Colgon quietly told her. "But I don't need your mercy. Cure me if you don't want to die."

The rotten smell was gone now. As if it had been a lie that he had ever smelled it. All he could smell now was the scent of the woman he had pinned against him.

"I-It does not... exist," she managed to squeeze out through her constricted trachea. He wasn't surprised that she could speak—he had left her enough freedom to do so. What she'd said had surprised him, though.

"I see." He had no use for her, then. Colgon tensed his arm. If you broke their necks, humans died in seconds. He didn't know if it was the same for Celestials, but he imagined there couldn't be much difference. He couldn't waste too much effort on one person. While he could move, he had to find someone who could cure him of the poison.

A second before the bones in her neck could dislodge, she spoke again, and this surprised him.

"N-No! All you were given was anesthesia."

Colgon went quiet and relaxed his arm. He clicked his tongue. He'd had a suspicion that that might be the case. Yet he'd been a moment from falling for their trick.

“So it was a bluff as I suspected,” he growled. “You placed a suggestion on me. That man before was just to scare me. Are you here to persuade me? What information were you planning on getting out of me?”

“The devil...” The woman’s voice contained a hint of panic. There was nothing strange about that if she was feeling fear over her suddenly rapidly approaching death, but he sensed something different...

He lowered his eyelids, frowning with suspicion when he realized that she wasn’t just fearing for herself. The woman feared something else. And with that fear, she spoke, her voice trembling.

“The devil of Kiesalhima...”

“What’s that?” he asked.

The woman rapidly continued. “The Demon King worshipper, Almagest... You people call him your lord. That man should have died long ago!”

He wasn’t strangling her anymore, but the woman was still taking shallow, strained breaths, her neck craned back.

“We’ve sent a new Doppel X out... Jack Frisbee will likely be able to hold him back some, but he will also likely fail. As long as Damian Rue is there, we cannot kill the lord! Tell us, for the sake of the continent! How do we destroy him?!”

She was a young woman. That was his first impression, at least. She seemed to fit the image of a Celestial with their eternal youth.

But as she spoke, the woman almost seemed to age. She dropped her expressionless act and almost seemed to be middle aged to him now.

And that wasn’t all. As she shook her head, Colgon realized her eyes were changing color, and he reached out his hand. There was something like a thin film attached to her face, which he peeled off. It was transparent, with a slight yellow tint to it. When he removed it and looked back at her, the woman’s eyes had changed colors to blue.

He held the film up to the woman’s face again and her eyes looked green to him.

Crumpling the film in his fist, Colgon muttered, “You’ve dyed your hair too,

haven't you? You're not a Celestial. What's going on here?"

The woman was no longer panicking. Holding her neck, she glared at him and quietly said, "Two hundred years have passed."

She went silent, almost as if she planned to wait another two hundred more. But after a few seconds, she spoke up again.

"You realized long ago that the sanctuary has none of its power left, didn't you?"

She gave him a mocking, ugly smile.

Epilogue

“Six were supposed to die.”

“Yes.”

“I would have liked for things to have proceeded according to plan.”

“I also regret not being able to confirm Leticia MacCready’s death. She will become my Achilles’ heel.”

“There was one more as well. This was a rather trivial mistake.”

“She was protected by her magic sword.”

“Shouldn’t you have foreseen that?”

“The girl using the sword? I predicted that she wouldn’t be able to use it.”

“Is that all it is?”

“Yes.”

“...”

“Regardless of our plans not working out, I don’t believe there will be much effect in the long run. And one thing has become clear to us as a result as well. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Hmm?”

“The Chaos Witch is returning to Kiesalhima.”



“I’d like for you to understand that the only reason you didn’t die was because I happened to be there.”

Orphen let the morning sun wash over him, still in his combat gear.

It was a strange feeling—being alive felt wrong to him. But alive he was, lying on a bed in a room in the lord’s mansion, looking outside through the window. And listening to someone’s grumbling.

“I know,” Orphen murmured dryly.

Aside from him, Damian Rue was also in the room, a nasty smile on his face. Then there was Lottecia, sitting in a corner holding her sword to her, and Winona, sleeping on another bed. Like Orphen, she’d almost been instantly killed but brought back to health by Damian. And like him, she was so weakened from the experience that she could hardly move.

When the white sorcerer healed him in Urbanrama, Orphen had been able to move right away, but that didn’t seem to be the case this time. Of course, in this situation, he was almost thankful for the chance to get some rest.

Orphen’s mood was worsening. Maybe he should start humming—that would probably annoy Damian. He did just that and the white sorcerer spoke up again as if to cut off his tune.

“Why couldn’t you win? I can’t understand it. He was just a man. He wasn’t a sorcerer. You were just barely still alive, but it wouldn’t be strange for you to have died with the state you were in.”

“Why?” Orphen scoffed. “I never thought something like that would exist. I hadn’t even imagined it. But it did.”

“What are you talking about?” The white sorcerer was unexpectedly slow.

Orphen groaned and waved his hand. “An assassin even Childman couldn’t compare to. That’s what he was. That’s likely all he was.”

It was nothing significant, though it had shattered some of the expectations he’d had for the sum of his life up until this point. But that was nothing significant.

He repeated the thought not to Damian but to himself. And he asked Damian something else.

“So? Where’s Claiomh and Majic?” He glared at Damian, who was standing there looking composed. “Where’s Tish? Is she safe?”

The white sorcerer didn’t answer right away. He didn’t seem to be in thought or anything like that. He just paused for some time before responding.

“Your sister is dead. She and the Thirteen Apostles assassins seem to have

finished each other off.”

“I only saw Irgitte out there.”

“There are ways to die that don’t leave behind a body.” This time, he responded quickly.

He wanted to scream, but just that made sharp pain shoot through his body, so he had to give up on the idea. Orphen groaned for some time, shaking his head atop the bed. “God...dammit!”

“I couldn’t detect the presence of a sanctuary assassin in our midst. There are flaws in the Network... It’s just as the man in the priest’s robes said.”

Damian’s matter-of-fact tone hit a nerve. But Orphen couldn’t move. Digging his nails into the sheets, he cursed again and again. “How can you be so blasé about it?!”

“I will use the experience of this failure to inform my future plans.”

“Your future plans? What the hell are you gonna do next? Your lord’s dead! And you’re not gonna tell me you brought him back to life too, are you?”

Even Damian Rue couldn’t revive the dead.

However, without any sort of expression on his face, the spirit said, “About that... It seems you’ll be meeting my lord soon. Stand up. No, you can’t, I suppose.”

“...What?” Orphen asked, and a moment later, the door opened. He looked toward it.

And there were Claiomh and Majic, along with another man leading them inside.



By now, the others probably really had forgotten all about them, Dartin supposed. He wasn’t waiting for that moment or anything, but he stood all the same.

“Let’s go, Brother. I think we came from that direction...”

One day was long enough to wait. His brother, who had been standing atop

the rock all that time and was now thoroughly covered in sand, nodded slowly.

“Guess you’re right.” His brother had a suitably serious expression on his face. Dortin had no idea what he was thinking, but it was also perfectly likely that he wasn’t thinking anything at all. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“Bet our dad’s just about ready to kick the bucket right around now.”

“Could be.”

“Guess we should go home.”

“Guess we should.”

After that short exchange, the two turned back toward the direction they’d come from.

Dortin stopped, however.

There had been a darkness blanketing the earth around them until just a moment ago. But the curtain of night had just been opened by the morning light.

Before them, he could see dark shadows, far blacker than the night.

And not just one or two of them.

As he watched, they increased without a sound.

As if encircling this featureless, desolate wasteland, they expanded out all around them.

“Brother...”

“Mm...” His brother still sounded carefree. “Never seen such huge dogs before. No, that’s not right. I’ve seen ’em a couple times, I think?”

They had seen them a few times, and Dortin remembered what they were.

The black wolves were several meters tall, with shining green eyes.

It was a vast army of Deep Dragons. The brothers could only stand and watch as the Fenrir increased in number out far into the distance of the plains.

Afterword

Wellll... I gotta apologize for ending with yet another cliffhanger again this time. I think it's pathetic myself, I really do. I'm also really sorry the release of this volume was postponed.

I'd like to say next time for sure... but at this point, it feels pointless to ask you to believe me, and I can't deny that even I don't have faith in my own words. Of course, I'm talking with the editorial department about ways to prevent this from happening again, but who knows if it'll go well... I'd consider myself fortunate if you decided to stick with me from now on despite all this.

The rest of the afterword was written before I knew the volume would be delayed, so please take that into account. I thought about rewriting the whole thing when I wrote this apology, but I thought the whole thing would get incredibly pessimistic if I did that, and I can't imagine my readers want that...

Once again, I sincerely apologize for everything.



I wonder if P90 magazines will be on sale by the time this book comes out. I'm Akita, thinking about nothing but stuff like that every day.

I, Akita, am out at a family restaurant writing this afterword, but the girl of the couple at the next table over just started saying stuff like "I look like XX in Morning Musume, right?" and "I look like Norika Fujiwara, right?" And the guy's even agreeing. But she doesn't look like them.

The rainy season just started the other day in Kanto. Before I knew it, it was raining all the time when I looked outside. It doesn't feel too bad looking out on the rainy town from the window like this. But I, Akita, didn't bring my umbrella.

I, Akita, can't go home, so I've been sticking around in the restaurant for a while. I finished the Shuuhei Fujisawa book I brought a while ago. Since I've got no other choice, I'm working on my manuscript now. It's the part of the evening when the place starts getting crowded, so the gazes of the staff are wonderfully

chilly.

Come to think of it, I, Akita, was invited to a friend's wedding the other day. When I said "It'd be way funnier to chuck onigiri or something instead of rice, right?" I was met with such heartwarming replies as "weirdo," "get out of here," and "are you having a rough time or something?"

But if the bride and groom were to show perfect evasion and maneuverability skills against a rain of countless onigiri, don't you think it would put all of their parents at ease? No, it's fine, I, Akita, don't need your pity.

Speaking of weddings, I'm writing this manuscript in June. I can't tell if time is moving quickly or slowly lately. It's kind of strange. But I, Akita, am managing to live healthily somehow.

The rain's letting up a bit. I, Akita, should probably head home soon.

But now I'm kind of getting into writing this afterword, and it doesn't seem like it's going to wrap up anytime soon, so I, Akita, am starting to regret this.

Looking outside, I see a person under the eaves of the gyudon place across the street, taking shelter from the rain. It probably started raining while he was eating and since he's full, he can't exactly go into another place and kill time, so he's staring at the sky at a complete loss since he doesn't want to go home in the rain, and he's hoping that if he keeps waiting like this, maybe that person that he cares for so much will happen to pass by and offer to share their umbrella, but his faint hope proves to be fruitless as the rain keeps falling, eventually turning to tears, which is the little mini story I, Akita, have just come up with.

I, Akita, glanced at the next table over again and that couple with the girl who looks like Norika Fujiwara (she didn't) is gone and has been replaced by someone who looks exactly like K-san from the editorial department who's here eating with a SUPER pretty lady. But it's probably somebody else.

If you really watch, there are all sorts of people who come and go from a family restaurant (though I guess that's not limited to family restaurants). You never get bored watching, so I really like them. My writing seems to go well here, so I end up coming a lot. But I don't want to cause trouble for the place, so I usually come late at night. The other day, I asked for a receipt and the

cashier said, “Shall I make that out to Mr. Akita?” I, Akita, am a little stressed out that they recognize my face now.

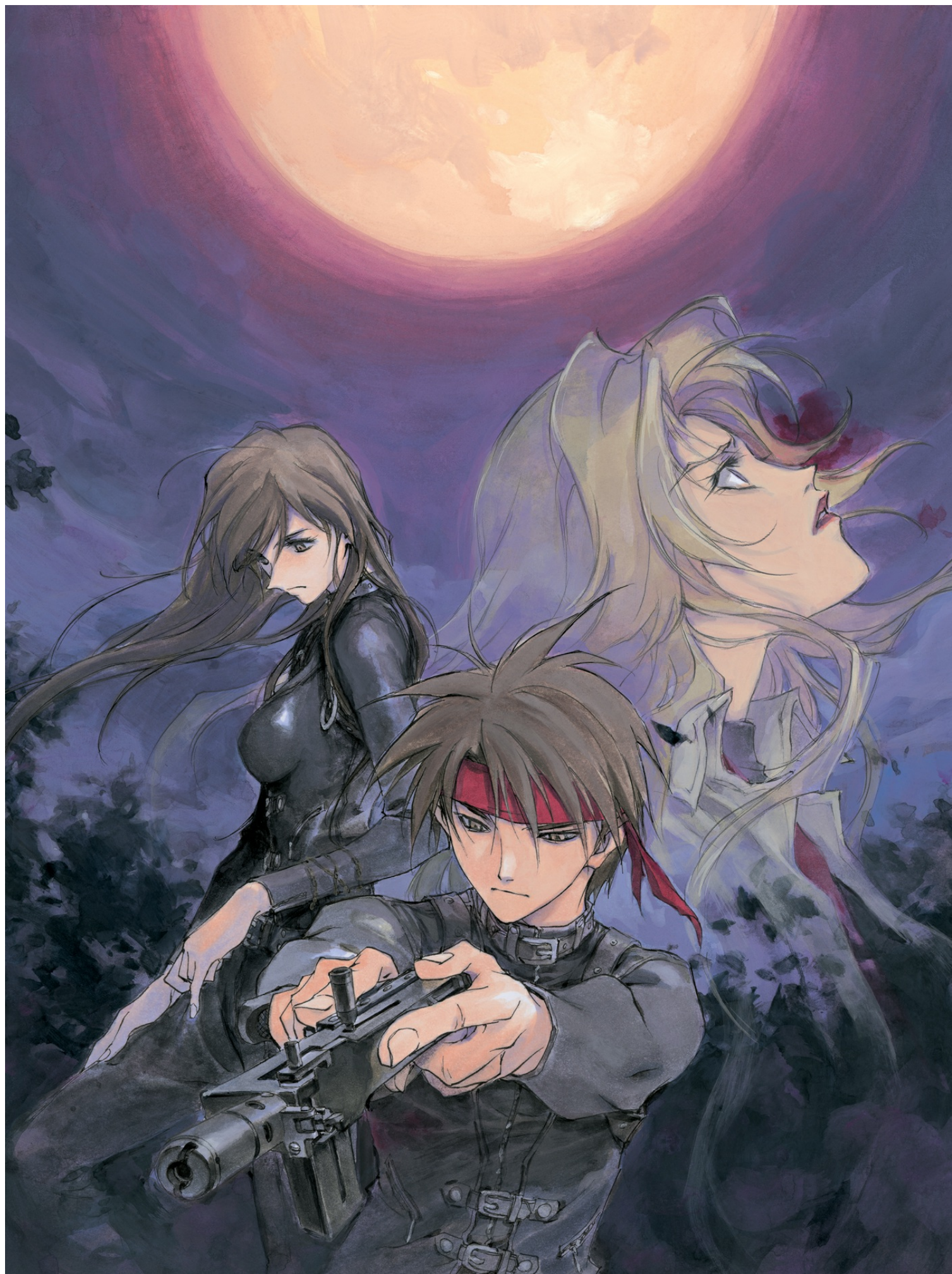
Even if the days are longer now, it’s currently dark outside. Nighttime rain. When it gets to be this time, I always think of the first few bars of “Juukuji no Machi” (I believe it was called that) that someone always used to sing on Kakkurakin Daihousou when I was a kid. Who was it who sang that? I, Akita, just can’t seem to remember.

Of course, there’s no way readers nowadays would know Kakkurakin Daihousou or Naoko-obaachan no Engawa Nikki or Kamakiri Kenpou. My own memories of them are pretty vague anyway, so sorry if I, Akita, got something wrong.

So anyway, I think I’m gonna go home soon. Mr. Gyuudon Place seems to still be waiting for his special someone, though. I, Akita, will go home in the rain.

So, thanks for hanging with me this time too. I hope we meet at the end of the next volume as well. See you~ This was Akita.

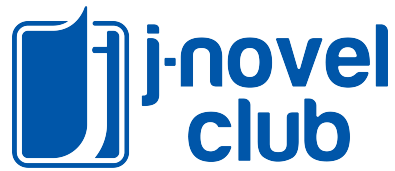
Yoshinobu Akita, June 2001











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by Yoshinobu Akita

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